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Regional Oral History Office
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Fiber Arts Oral History Series

Lillian Elliott

ARTIST, INSTRUCTOR, AND INNOVATOR IN FIBER ARTS

With an Introduction by
Charles Edmund Rossbach

Interviews Conducted by
Harriet Nathan
in 1989

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the Nation. Oral history is a modern research technique involving an interviewee and an informed interviewer in spontaneous conversation. The taped record is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The resulting manuscript is typed in final form, indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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Lillian Elliott, 1991

Photograph by John Gregor

Cataloging Information

ELLIOTT, Lillian Wolock (b. 1930)

Artist, teacher

Artist, Instructor, and Innovator in Fiber Arts, 1992, xi, 215 pp.

Family, and early public school art education in Detroit; Wayne State University; Cranbrook Academy of Art, MFA, 1955; first woman designer, Ford Motor Co., 1956-1959; teaching: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Department of Design, UC Berkeley (1966-1971), California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland (1972-1976), Pacific Basin School of Textile Arts, Berkeley; marriage to Roy Elliott; thoughts on textile history, art as vocation, playfulness and experiment in art, artist's need for university education, influential teachers; technique in ceramics, painting, drawing, textiles, weaving, netting, collapse fabric; commissions, competitions, shows; fiber art in Sweden, British Columbia, Hawaii. Includes a joint interview with Pat Hickman, and photographs of work.

Introduction by Charles Edmund Rossbach, Professor Emeritus, Department of Design, UC Berkeley.

Interviewed 1989 by Harriet Nathan for the Fiber Arts Oral History Series. Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

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PREFACE

The Regional Oral History Office of The Bancroft Library selects as memoirists persons who have played important roles in the development of the western community. Since the beginning of the oral history program, artists in many fields have taken their place among the memoirists. When the art of handweaving went through an upheaval during the 1950s, fiber artists gained new recognition, and developed novel ways of using fiber as a means of individual expression. The creativity of fiber artists has won them a significant place in the complex of artistic activity, particularly in the San Francisco Bay Area, and has established the importance of their development and history. Under the leadership of the late director of The Bancroft Library, James D. Hart, the Fiber Arts Oral History Series was begun in 1983.

The emergence of the Bay Area as a center for fiber arts was stimulated by a number of influences including those of faculty members at the University of California at Berkeley and at Davis. Departments of Decorative Arts and of Design at Berkeley were led for many years by Professor Charles Edmund (Ed) Rossbach, now Emeritus, who was the first memoirist in the oral history series on Fiber Arts. At the Davis campus, Katherine Westphal (Rossbach), Professor of Design, gave strong and innovative leadership in the Department of Applied Behavioral Sciences from 1966 until her retirement as Professor Emeritus in 1979. Fiber artist Lillian Elliott has worked with students in a number of Bay Area centers, with extended periods in the Design Department at the University of California at Berkeley, and the California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC) in Oakland. Significant leaders in the Bay Area also included, among many others, such renowned fiber artists as the late Trude Guermonprez, who taught at CCAC; and the late Dorothy Wright Liebes, whose San Francisco studio generated innovative fiber concepts and designs for industry.

Lillian Elliott provides the third oral history memoir in the series on Fiber Arts in the San Francisco Bay Area, a series designed to include artists whose work indicates some of the variety the fiber arts movement has generated. She is an artist and teacher who uses a full range of techniques and materials, encouraging her students to learn by doing and by experimenting as she does. Her weaving includes tapestries, card weaving, and netting. Lillian Elliott is also accomplished in basketry, ceramics, sculpture, drawing, painting, graphic design, lace making, and embroidery, and has designed textiles for industry. Her work is noted for its emotional power and flow of ideas. She believes that an artist's mind requires cultivation, and advocates university liberal arts studies supported by access to libraries, museums, and a wide range of courses.

Continuously productive as a individual artist, she has worked for eight years (1981-1989) in collaboration with fiber artist Pat Hickman, a former student who became a colleague. Both have won recognition for collaborative work as well as for their ongoing individual artwork.

Members of the Fiber Arts Advisory Committee have provided valuable advice in the development of the series. The committee includes Hazel V. Bray*, Curator of Crafts, Oakland Museum; Gyöngy Laky, Professor of Design, University of California at Davis; Cecile McCann, former publisher and editor-in-chief, Artweek; Frank A. Norick, Principal Museum Anthropologist, Lowie Museum, UC Berkeley; Ed Rossbach, Emeritus Professor of Architecture (Design), UC Berkeley; Carol Sinton, fiber artist, San Francisco; Katherine Westphal, Emeritus Professor of Design, UC Davis; and James D. Hart*, Emeritus Professor of English, and Director of The Bancroft Library.

The oral history process at the University of California, Berkeley, is based on tape-recorded interviews with persons who have been important in the development of the west. The purpose of oral history memoirs is to capture and preserve for future research the perceptions, recollections, and observations of these individuals. Research and preparation of a topic outline precede the interview sessions. The outline is prepared in conjunction with close associates and other persons in the memoirist's field, as well as with the memoirist, who in turn may use the suggestions as aids to memory, choose among them, or add new topics.

The tape-recorded interviews are transcribed, lightly edited by the interviewer, and reviewed and approved by the memoirist. Index and other materials are added. Final processing includes final typing, photographic reproduction, binding, and deposit in The Bancroft Library and other selected libraries and collections. The volumes do not constitute publications, but are primary research materials made available under specified conditions for the use of researchers.

The Fiber Arts series is supported by grants from the Mina Schwabacher Fund and a donation from the Friends of The Bancroft Library. The philanthropies of the late Mina Schwabacher have included support for hospital programs that serve children, as well as scholarship bequests to Whitman College in her birthplace of Walla Walla, Washington. The Mina Schwabacher Fund was a gift to the University of California at Berkeley in honor of her brother Frank, who was a loyal alumnus and supporter of the University. The Regional Oral History Office acknowledges with appreciation the generous and essential support for the project.

*Deceased during the term of the project.

The Regional Oral History Office is under the direction of Willa Baum, Division Head, and the administrative direction of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Willa K. Baum, Division Head
Regional Oral History Office

Harriet Nathan, Project Head
Regional Oral History Office

May 1992
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

INTRODUCTION--by Charles Edmund Rossbach

This is a short essay that I wrote (for my own satisfaction) ten years ago, after I had heard a lecture by Lillian Elliott at the Pacific Basin School of Textile Arts in Berkeley. She had been working as artist in residence under the sponsorship of the California State Arts Commission. The lecture was a sort of progress report and a public unveiling of a tapestry that she had completed during her residency. Reading the essay today, I feel that it is the best introduction to her oral history memoir that I can make.

I will add that for quite a few years she and I were colleagues at the University of California, Berkeley, where we both taught courses in textile design. I had become acquainted with her work when she exhibited at the Richmond Art Center. I was pleased to discover that she had been a student at Cranbrook Academy of Art, where I had studied many years earlier. At Cranbrook we had both been involved in ceramics as well as textiles, and both had studied with Maja Grotell, who was an important influence on our work.

The lecture attracted an overflow audience on an evening so stormy no one might have been expected to stir forth. More and more chairs kept being added, lifted over the heads of the audience already assembled, until the seating arrangement was total disorder. The audience was facing in all directions at once. Yet this distraction was almost ideal because the entire room was part of the presentation. In one corner, now engulfed by the audience and wet rain-gear, stood the new tapestry loom. The audience was invited to inspect the loom, to operate the treadles, and to observe the ingenious arrangement that keeps the individual warps evenly spaced. On the opposite wall were two tapestries, unpretentiously installed just above the heads of the audience. On the adjoining wall was the screen for slides. In the center of everything, like a ringmaster, stood the artist, lecturing and operating the projector and directing attention to the various parts of the room. And all the while more and more rain-soaked people kept crowding in although there was nowhere for them. The effect was of a far-out theatrical performance.

Only later did I recognize the event for what it was--a tribute to Lillian Elliott and the enormous comprehensive influence she exerts in the area. By now I tend to take this for granted. Like no other textile artist here, she has a loyal following that pays attention to her words and her work. She is a phenomenon in the local textile scene, commanding the attention of everyone involved in fiber. Her absolute seriousness, the force of her ideas, and the intensity of her personality, are indispensable to the liveliness of the fiber arts here.

That evening her slides were concerned with the tapestry she had just completed and the one she was commencing on the new loom. She showed the completed tapestry as details, quite different from the reality of the work itself hanging only a few feet away. At any moment, it seemed, she might abruptly shift the projector and propel the photographic images onto the weaving itself. And then, in keeping with what she was saying about her methods of designing, she might have held up a camera (hand-holding because she feels restricted by a tripod) and might have photographed the imagery upon imagery. And then she might have projected that slide and traced its configuration onto a sheet of paper mounted on the wall. She might then have black-lined or photostatted the tracing, and selected the tiniest detail to enlarge as a cartoon for a new weaving.

Her weavings proceed as a series of transformations of imagery. A detail of a failed card weaving inspired a tapestry by being converted into photographs, slides, drawings. The process involves a most careful and unpredictable selection of details which become wholes. The movement is a magnification of magnifications. An image goes through generations of transformations until the "start" appears as removed from what is ultimately woven, as a drop of water appears removed from what is revealed under intense magnification. Recognition of the woven images is possible only if the artist itemizes the steps she took (comprehension of the logic and imagination of the succession of steps seems part of the aesthetic satisfaction of her tapestries). The viewer then feels privy to secret information, and experiences an unsettling sense of revelation--that nothing in the world is quite what it seems. The weaving confirms the mysteriousness and incomprehensibility of everything.

When the tapestries are viewed at close range, the nice orderliness of woven structure appears transformed by the focus of the artist into something infinitely complex, ragged, and raw--again like the amazing transformation of a clear drop of water into a living swarm. Each tiny intersection (which ordinarily in a woven piece would be no more than a module identical to thousands of others) asserts its individuality and imparts a sense of the artist's impatience and her eagerness to inject more texture, more color, more weight. Finally the tiny variations are so numerous and so insistent, they exhaust the viewer, who is obliged to

move off from the work. Then miraculously the tiny components relinquish their individual powers and coalesce into configurations and textures of great directness and apparent simplicity. Viewing a tapestry by Lillian Elliott offers little easy delight, but much sustained wonder.

Her talk was about beginnings and endings, the transformation of imagery from the easily recognizable to the obscure and private. The projects were presented as "experiments," to separate them, I suppose, from the production weaving which the School is promoting, and from the commission weaving that is such a conspicuous feature of the Berkeley textile scene. The production weaving and the commissions proceed with guaranteed and predictable results; Lillian Elliott's "experiments" evolve and, only when they are finished, reveal themselves.

Someone asked what the experiment was in the tapestry being woven on the vertical loom. As I recall, she said that this was her first experience in weaving on a vertical loom. Even the mechanism itself was somewhat of an experiment since it had never been used before and had only recently been designed for the School's special purposes. The cartoon was experimental in its nature and in its use of black and white. She had proposed to allow students to experience the loom by actually weaving on her piece, filling in the plain areas of background. This scheme she had abandoned when she quickly discovered that there were no areas that she could assign to someone else. Every weft was a decision. Each thread was considered individually; the decisions could not be calculated in advance; the work in progress had to be experienced constantly, and reacted to. Despite all the elaborate processes for achieving a cartoon, each weft remained a decision to be made during the actual weaving.

It was no surprise to hear that she could not allow anyone else to insert weft into her tapestry. I wondered why she had ever entertained such an idea. As she said, each weft was a decision as the work progressed. And she herself would not have made the identical decisions a second time if she had woven a second tapestry from the same cartoon. How different in approach from that of Anni Albers with her pictorial weavings. Those that were destroyed in World War II could be rewoven--and not necessarily by Albers herself but by other weavers--because she had saved the designs.

In the course of the slides Lillian Elliott showed tapestries woven in France to paintings by de Kooning and Kline. These painters had not done the weaving; someone else had converted the canvases from paint to yarn. The weavings were remarkably accurate. Fiber became as liquid as the flowing paint. Lillian Elliott recognized the technical virtuosity of these weavings, but she said that she preferred the paintings.

The questions immediately arose in my mind, did I prefer her weaving to the preparatory sheets? I did not like her sketches, photostats, slides, black-lines and blowups less than I liked the weaving, but neither did I like them more. All seemed art work of equal expressive power. I responded to the beginning and the ending, and the various steps in between. For me the work of art included even her eloquent presentation.

Ed Rossbach
Professor of Design, Emeritus
University of California, Berkeley

February 1991
Berkeley, California

INTERVIEW HISTORY--Lillian Elliott

Lillian Wolock Elliott is the third memoirist in the oral history series on Fiber Arts in the San Francisco Bay Area. A continuously inventive artist and a challenging teacher, she draws on her own experience in teaching and learning to formulate her views on the education of an artist. She believes in the need to combine a rigorous university liberal arts curriculum and the hands-on experience that only the creation of works of art can provide. For her students, she observes that hard work is more important than talent. For herself, she has never allowed her own abundant talent to excuse her from the serious work and productivity that are integral to her nature.

Serious but not solemn, she shows a sparkling enthusiasm for the work at hand, and curiosity about the new possibilities that emerge. When she says that she "never loses interest" in any of the materials and techniques she already knows, she includes the many ways to produce and embellish textiles, basketry and other fiber arts, ceramics, sculpture, drawing, painting, as well as photography, writing, and graphic design. She adds that if the work "turns out the way you hope it will. . . . you realize you weren't hoping for enough. . . . It's almost never enough for me, so I keep going."

Shortly after she and her new husband, Roy Elliott, arrived in the Bay Area in 1960 to find that no jobs were available, she determined to cultivate her artwork, free for once of the demands of school and overlapping part-time work. Suddenly she faced the artist's terror; she questioned whether, despite a promising start, she now had something to say in her art. As she followed her own vision, her productivity and originality banished fear, and she began to achieve the first of a long and continuing series of awards, teaching invitations, grants, shows, prizes, and widespread recognition for her weavings and other artworks.

Her early studies at the Detroit Institute for the Arts and Cass Technical High School, and her degrees from Wayne State University and the Cranbrook Academy of Art led to major teaching experiences in the Bay Area. These included years in the Design Department, University of California at Berkeley, the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, as well as a variety of other centers in the Bay Area and abroad. Lillian Elliott honors the value of class time for artists, and admires artists who inspire their students to create. She respects and challenges her students, often accepting the same assignments they receive. A strikingly powerful piece, the basket "Goya," emerged from this effort.

One of her students was Pat Hickman, an accomplished fiber artist who moved to California in 1972, and at the suggestion of Joanne Brandford, a mutual friend, sought out Lillian Elliott as her teacher. They became friends, colleagues, and highly successful collaborators, while each continued her own individual work. In Interview 3, both serve as narrators, discussing their own interests and the way they work collaboratively.

For this oral history memoir, Lillian Elliott provided five interviews. The first (February 13), the second (February 28), the fourth (May 8), and the fifth (May 22, 1989) took place in the livingroom of her Berkeley home. The third, the joint session with Pat Hickman, was held on March 14, 1989 in their well-lighted studio on San Pablo Avenue in Berkeley. The interviewer prepared a suggested outline, supported by research that included viewing pictures of some of their artwork, and a number of shows, as well as publications and other reference material. The interviews were taped, transcribed, lightly edited, and submitted to the appropriate narrators with queries on a few specific points. Lillian Elliott clarified a number of areas and edited out some repetitions and ambiguities. Pat Hickman reviewed and approved her own remarks.

When Lillian Elliott opened the door of her house, the livingroom offered a profusion of baskets, textiles, sculptures in process, wall-hangings; some of these her own work, others, part of her collection. The result was dazzling, but not haphazard. Her record-keeping system makes these and many other works accessible in the time it takes her to walk from one room to another, to retrieve an example of weaving, a slide, or photo. Her presence and manner are warm, strong, and quiet; her voice is low and pleasant. She speaks seriously about deeply held convictions, and talks of new ideas in artwork and new possibilities with joy and curiosity, and a sense of adventure.

Some of her baskets suggest calligraphy; they are nonutilitarian, open and filled with energy, designed to hold only air and perhaps the viewer's attention. She had considered ways to cover these elements with some clinging substance, when Pat Hickman proposed the use of gut. Small-boned and delicate in appearance, Pat Hickman undertook to explore the properties of gut, an unappealing substance she found capable of great strength and beauty, and with a translucent quality that complemented the powerful elements of Lillian Elliott's basketry shapes. Their joint work, "Romany," an invited presentation at the prestigious Lausanne Biennal, demonstrated their mastery of size, shape, and materials.

As this note is being written, plans are underway for a one-person show of Lillian Elliott's works, and selections from her own art collection. The show is to be presented by the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum in July and August, 1992. Pat Hickman will write an accompanying newsletter report.

When the oral history volume was in the final stages of preparation, it was necessary to find a picture of Lillian Elliott for the frontispiece. She rejected several handsome snapshots and portraits. She finally found one of herself at work, concentrating not on the way the camera would see her, but on what her hands were creating. It was the right choice.

Harriet Nathan
Interviewer/Editor

June 8, 1992
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The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name LILLIAN WOLOCK ELLIOTT

Date of birth JUNE 4, 1930

Birthplace DETROIT, MICHIGAN

Father's full name LEON WOLOCK

Occupation SMALL BUSINESS MAN

Birthplace VLADIMERETZ, USSR

Mother's full name EDITH FREEDMAN WOLOCK

Occupation HOUSEWIFE

Birthplace BREZNO, POLAND

Your spouse ROY ELLIOTT

Your children JEREMY, AARON

Where did you grow up? DETROIT, MI.

Present community BERKELEY, CA.

Education WAYNE UNIVERSITY - B.A. (DETROIT, MI)

CRANBROOK ACADEMY OF ART - MFA (BLOOMFIELD HILLS, MI)

Occupation(s) ARTIST - INSTRUCTOR

Areas of expertise TEXTILES, BASKETS.

Other interests or activities PAINTING, CERAMICS, GRAPHICS.

Organizations in which you are active ADVISORY BOARD - CRAFT + FOLK ART MUSEUM, S.F.; FELLOW AMERICAN CRAFT COUNCIL

I GROWING UP IN DETROIT: AN EARLY START IN ART

[Interview 1: February 13, 1989]##¹Introduction

Elliott: I was pleased to know that I can read the transcript, because I know once somebody wrote an article about me. I asked to be able to read it before it was published. She [the writer] was really very offended. Actually, that happened twice. I said, "I don't intend to change the whole thing. I wouldn't do that." As it turned out, there were two very minor, but factual events that were given incorrectly. They were heard incorrectly, and I was glad to be able to correct them. But both of the authors really weren't sure that they wanted to write the article if I asked to see it first. I think that's very strange.

Nathan: It is strange. It does suggest that that was a different kind of interview. Journalists, for example, often do not believe that the person they're interviewing should have that right. That's part of the context of that kind of interview.

Elliott: I was once interviewed in the *Berkeley Gazette*. They gave all kinds of incorrect information on what was essential for spinning, such as having a steady hand, which really has nothing to do with the process.

Nathan: Oh, that's awful.

Elliott: There's no way you can correct that again.

Nathan: No. That's right.

¹This symbol indicates the start of a new tape or tape segment. For a guide to the tapes, see page 194.

Elliott: It doesn't matter anyway. I'm glad to have a chance to correct it, if I feel that it's wrong. I think in general, there's something to the spontaneity. Even if it doesn't come through, even if there might have been other things to add, I would very rarely want to change something in any major way after the event. It's like teaching a class. You can never really describe what happened in the class when the class is over.

Nathan: Of course. Well, I think of artists as being somehow brave, able to seize the moment, and let things evolve. So I should think it might be easier for you than for other people.

Elliott: I don't know [laughter].

Beginning to Draw

Nathan: Well let's just begin and see how it goes. Shall we talk about some of your early memories?

Elliott: Actually, among my earliest memories are those that dealt with art. I remember the earliest ones were drawing the cat that we had. We had a grocery store. My parents had a grocery store until I was nine, and I sat at the grocery store and drew the cat, and drew my father, and drew everything around me, and spent most of my time doing that.

Nathan: Do you know why you were called to do this?

Elliott: I just remember that by the time I was three, it was clear that I was interested, seriously interested, and apparently somewhat good at it, so that I continued. I wrote poetry as well at that time, but it was really the drawing that was the most exciting to me. I was two and a half years younger than my sister, and she was in school at five. I thought that I would like very much to go to school, but I liked to just be by myself. I remember rather happy hours just drawing this cat. I very much liked this.

Nathan: You were attracted to the drawing first, before color?

Elliott: Right. I think that along with that, there was a certain (my mother would have called it a stubborn streak), but I think it was a kind of independence of choice, in that I wanted to make all my decisions about my hair and the clothes I wore. I think it must have been somewhat difficult for my mother whose first daughter was very demure and [laughs] dependent. I was very

outspoken and very independent. My mother didn't know what to do with me.

School and Special Art Class

Nathan: When you then went to school, were you encouraged in your art?

Elliott: Very much. I taught myself to read, and I read very early. My parents were struggling financially at that time. It was the aftermath of the Depression. We all thought it would be nice if I could start school early. I was quite tall, so people thought that I was older. I went to interview with the principal to see if I could start school early, and I wasn't able to do that. Later I was skipped a grade. But, I couldn't start early; that was fine, it was just that it was partly a problem with my parents in terms of finding someone to be with me and all.

When I first started school, I went to a very small school named Alger in Detroit, which had only about 100 students. It was a rather unusual school, a very nice one. I knew everyone in the school and all the teachers; then I left in the third grade. We moved to another neighborhood when we sold the grocery store. The new school was MacCullough, and I was excited because there was a library in the school itself. I didn't know that there were schools like that. It was on the other side of Detroit. Detroit has neighborhoods that move, that shift economically and racially.

When I moved I was in the third grade. My sister was in the fifth or sixth, and she took me to see the art teacher and said that I was interested particularly in art. We talked about whether or not there were special art classes. In fact, there were in Detroit. There was a program for talented kids in music and in art. It was a wonderful program. Now with the tax base switched, because of the flight to suburbia, it will never be quite the same again.

I've just recently talked to people working in the schools in Detroit about this. It was something that was a remarkable program. I've never come across another like it where in the elementary schools from the fourth to the sixth grade, kids would stay after school once every two weeks, or every three weeks and meet for an hour and a half or two hours with the art teacher of the school. There was an art teacher in every school. We had art as part of our education.

Then when I was at Durfee Junior High, we met with one of the regional teachers (that is out of three schools). All of the kids that were designated as talented would meet together once a month or so with this teacher who had been chosen to teach the class.

The Art Institute and Cass Technical High School (1945-1948)

Elliott: In high school, there was a program at the Art Institute where we met. All of this was free. The Art Institute had a program every Saturday morning, and we would have a rather casual, but informative lecture first together, and then we would go in small groups into separate rooms of the Art Institute to paint. I remember being in those rooms and looking. We would get to remember and know the art that was in that room because we had done work based on it. Each week the focus would shift so that sometimes it was color or technique and sometimes it was an approach to space. We were encouraged to look at the art, think about the approach and then do a painting or drawing that was based on that approach. Each week the class would move to a different room which represented a different time period or country.

There was also a program for kids who were interested, but weren't particularly talented, whose parents wanted them to go, or who wanted to go. That they paid a rather low amount for, but it was a wonderful program. It said art was worthwhile. It was really thrilling.

There's also a school in Detroit called Cass Tech (Cass Technical High School) that's like New York's School of Music and Art that is shown in "Fame." Well Cass was like that, but it was broader. It was in the middle of the industrial city, and kids came from Windsor and from farms in Canada. People would come as post-graduates to this high school for a year or two years to study a particular thing that they hadn't been able to take in their high schools.

We were treated as adults. One of the strengths of the program was that the teachers and the students in each area were interested in the same thing, so that we could talk to the poster teacher about posters and art, and talk to all of the teachers about art.

It was really a remarkable program. I had wanted to go to Cass and I was discouraged from doing so by my parents who, I think, were worried about how I would earn a living. It was also

far from where we lived. So I attended the regular high school in my neighborhood, which was a very, very strong academic high school. It was all right, it just wasn't what I had hoped to do. I went to the class at the Art Institute on Saturday mornings and had a teacher there from Cass who was very encouraging and said he really felt that I should be at Cass. I transferred the next term.

Nathan: How old were you?

Elliott: That was in high school. I was in the tenth grade, and by the eleventh grade I had switched to Cass [1945-1948]. I stayed an extra half year or so at the end, because there were so many credits in art that I needed to fulfill, and I wanted to take college prep courses. That's a long answer to a simple question.

Nathan: But how revealing. In addition to this inspiration from your teachers, did you get something from the other students?

Elliott: At Cass? Well, at Cass it was interesting, because it was the first time to actually be in a situation where everybody was quite talented. It put you down a peg, but that was interesting. I just re-evaluated my strengths.

It was very exciting. We had academics. The academic subjects were not particularly good at Cass. I found later that although everyone was quite motivated while at Cass, many of the people who were majoring in the different disciplines didn't stay in them. That was particularly true with music. A lot of the kids who were extraordinarily accomplished in music studied it because their parents had started them off very early, and they had managed to achieve a certain amount of success. But then, maybe one parent would die who had been important, and the student simply seemed to lose interest in music. Or, as you know, the music and art world are not particularly easy to make your way in, and so many people would drop off along the way. Cass was a very vital high school. It wasn't so much that we learned from each other; the atmosphere was very exciting and unusual.

Nathan: Were you aware of what artists outside of school were doing?

Elliott: Sure. At Cass we went to the Michigan Artists' show and the Michigan Craftsmen's show. We were terribly interested in the professional shows. I was particularly good at drawing, and so I studied commercial art. It was the most demanding and prestigious program, and if you could draw well, that was what you took.

I wanted to take college prep as well. There were several other majors within art. A lot of the people who took the other art majors were not nearly as good at traditional drawing and painting. So, I took a course where I took design for about two and a half years, and perspective drawing for two years. It was very demanding.

In a way, after I graduated I realized that Cass students were somehow facile in their work. They were young, so they didn't have the maturity to match the levels of skill that they had, and yet the excitement and the encouragement and the general pulse of the place was so compelling that it was a rare experience.

It was worth it even if some students didn't go on into art professionally. It was one period in their lives when they were really motivated. I think it's one of the things that we don't see a lot in high schools. It wasn't because there wasn't pressure. There was pressure to finish. There were deadlines for poster contests, and we would stay at school all night, or work all night at home and bring in projects. That doesn't usually happen until a little later. So it was nice to see that that was possible.

Nathan: How were you designated "talented" in the first place?

Elliott: A teacher decided; or if a student was particularly interested and made a point of saying so.

Sometimes a teacher would simply say, "I have two tickets for the Art Institute [Detroit Institute of Arts] classes for Saturday mornings. Are any of you interested?" For instance, in high school, at this academic school that I was going to, Central, the teacher was teaching cartooning and I was not very good at cartooning, nor was I very interested in it. I think you can do cartooning and have it be exciting, and you can approach it as an art project, but it wasn't taught in a way that I found interesting. So I didn't particularly shine.

I think the teacher was very surprised that I thought that I was skilled, not that I was skilled in cartooning (God help me), but skilled at art or even interested. So when she offered the tickets and I said that I really would like to go, she gave me one even though she didn't think that I was particularly accomplished. It was just very nice that that was possible.

Nathan: Yes, it was. What a wonderful opportunity.

Elliott: I don't think the program has continued this way any more; not with the breakdown of neighborhoods and the exodus to suburbia. It doesn't really happen in the same way.

Nathan: Perhaps a little later on when we're talking about some of the ways that you have worked in basketry and other areas, I'd like to pursue with you the idea that you're still drawing.

Elliott: Oh, yes. I think so, too.

Nathan: Calligraphy?

Elliott: Yes, I'm interested in that, but really I'm interested in all graphic arts, as well as textiles. I found that I had a real strength in my graphic work. I thought that was the way everybody drew who drew. I mean, I knew that there were those people who drew photographically. I knew I didn't do that, but my drawings were strong and very personal.

I remember in high school a young man named Don Carrick who later became a book illustrator and writer of kids' books. I haven't seen him since high school, but he lives somewhere in New York State, and I've seen his books. He was sitting at the desk next to me. He turned around and he said to me, "My God, you draw just like a boy." At that time, that was a great compliment. Today it's just funny.¹

I've met two other women who are roughly my age who said that because they drew well and had strength in their work, that was said as a compliment to them, too. You knew at the time that there was something wrong with it, yet you took whatever encouragement you could get.

Nathan: Yes. How perfectly of the era that was, too. So along with your art, I gather you had this impulse for the academic as well?

Elliott: I did well in school. I was very interested in school. I was a kind of irregular student in the sense that I seemed to spend all of my time on one thing, and then all of my time on another. I didn't seem to be able to keep it all going simultaneously bubbling on the different burners. It worked out all right.

¹Don Carrick died about a year ago. I saw his obituary in the *New York Times*. L.E.

Parents' Background and Father's Skills

Nathan: Was there anyone in your family you thought of as an artist?

Elliott: My father was very skilled at many things with his hands. My parents came from Europe, both from small towns. My mother came from the area of occupied Poland. My father was from Vladimeretz, a small town in the Soviet Union. They left Europe just after the First World War. They both were in families in which the father (my grandfathers) had come to this country to earn enough money to send back to bring the family over. In both cases, the First World War broke out, and the wives and children were stuck in Europe, and the fathers were here.

My father was one of eleven, and my mother one of nine. I think life was extraordinarily hard for them. My mother came to this country when she was sixteen, and my father when he was twenty-one. My mother went through high school in Detroit. My father worked during the day but he went through night school to complete his high school diploma. My father, along with all of his brothers, had learned a trade in Europe, so that, though he couldn't speak English, he'd be able to find a job here. He was a tinsmith. At that time, there was a great need for rain gutters, and many things on houses which are not used today. My father was very fast in the way in which he moved, and very skilled. He was generally handy, so he could make almost anything, and build things.

When I was a teenager we moved to a new house and my father painted murals on the wall which are sort of folk art--trees that he remembers from Europe. They're pure folk art. I mean, trees don't exist that are like that. They're very stylized, and they're charming.

He was completely untrained in art but could make charming drawings. He valued the fact that he could make and build things, and he did build small furniture for me. Later, he actually built a whole house, a cottage for us that he made into a real house. He built the whole thing: the foundation, and the entire building. He installed the electricity. He had to have an architect to approve it just so that he could submit the plans to the city. In fact, he was rather unusually skilled so that he could do that.

Nathan: Did your family value your abilities?

Elliott: When I was young. When it was clear that I was serious about it, they weren't sure it was such a good idea, because they thought that it might be nice for me to be some sort of proper

professional. I think they felt that it was too uncertain. It is.

Nathan: You got out of high school, and did you have a notion of where you wanted to go to college?

Elliott: No, I had no notion all the way through school. I think I wasn't at all sure of where I was going. I just knew that I really enjoyed doing artwork. I once remember I had to write some composition on what I was going to do, and I said I was going to do commercial artwork, just because I couldn't imagine what I would be doing. I didn't particularly think I wanted to teach.

When I was graduating from high school I had a teacher who sponsored me for a scholarship. I enjoyed speaking, and I enjoyed writing, and that wasn't especially common at a technical high school. She encouraged me to attend a university so I could study liberal arts along with art.

The Nature of Cass Tech

Elliott: The technical high school was an interesting one. Cass included many things. It was also vocational training, and not really fine art training. The reason that commercial art was on the program was because you could earn a living doing it. I don't know what they thought musicians were going to do, but people who were pre-med came there to study science. There was also a foundry in the school. People studied drafting who thought they might be industrial designers later.

It had all kinds, a wide range, and it included economically the widest range possible; racially, the widest range possible; socially. I mean in every way. That was very interesting. But what happened was most of the time, you were with the people that were in your major.

Nathan: Were any of the teachers themselves serious artists?

Elliott: They considered themselves serious artists, and some of them were very good. A number of them had done work in the field and exhibited in the field or had had jobs doing commercial art. The man who had been very important for me, I think, Don Brackett, exhibited in painting shows very often. Later he wasn't as important for me, but he had been important in terms of encouraging me.

I was just thinking; when I was graduating, the teacher who was sponsoring me was somebody who thought that I should go some place with choices, in case I decided not to go into art [laughs]. My grades were not all A's, but they were high.

That really irritated the hell out of me. But, she, Mrs. Obel, thought that somehow I might choose to go into theater or speaking. She was very quiet, a very skilled graphic artist. She did illustration. I think she felt if you could say it, you might as well say it. She felt that an artist was somebody who couldn't speak well, or who didn't think so well, but who could draw well. I didn't fit her particular notion of what an artist was. You run into that all the time anyway. People will say, "Oh, you don't look like an artist," or "You're so articulate for an artist," as if we were all same.

Wayne University (now Wayne State University) (1948-1952)

Elliott: She was kind enough to help me apply, and I applied to Carnegie Tech, which is in Pittsburgh. I didn't know where I wanted to go or what to do, particularly, but I knew I wanted to go to college somewhere, and I was a runner-up for the scholarship at Carnegie Tech.

I don't know what I would have done had I gone there. I knew my family couldn't afford to send me to college, and though I had been working doing some jobs, there was no way I could save enough money to go to college at that time. So, I applied, I didn't get it, and I went to Wayne [1948-1952], which is what I sort of thought I would be able to do if there wasn't any other possibility. That way, I could live at home.

Nathan: Was that a disappointment to have to live at home?

Elliott: You know, at that time, unless you had quite a lot of money, you really didn't think about going away. My sister had gone to Wayne before me, for a time. She's an accountant. She didn't go all the way through, but she went part of the time for at least a couple of years. Carnegie Tech was just outside of my sights. I couldn't see how I would be able to go. I don't know what I would have done if I had gotten the scholarship. I would have figured it out, but I wasn't quite sure how I would do that.

It was exciting at Wayne at that time, it was when all the vets were coming back, so there were different age groups, and there was a lot of excitement, a lot of deep-felt political discussions in the snack bars. That was where a lot of the

education was going on. But for me, actually, what was most exciting, I think at that time, was that I took some English classes that were wonderful. I felt it was so exciting.

Nathan: Were these literature?

Elliott: Yes, yes. One class, I don't remember what the title of the class was, but we focused on Jefferson, and it was just wonderfully exciting to me.

Nathan: Thomas Jefferson?

Elliott: Thomas Jefferson.

Nathan: And his writing?

Elliott: Yes. I don't know what the class was called. I took some very exciting classes in Russian literature in translation, and I took classic literature, which turned out to be English literature. I took a lot of literature classes. I just remember classes where we read Fielding and Virginia Woolf. I seem to have been the only person in class who responded directly to her. I was surprised since I found her work so moving. Then I took a Shakespeare class one summer where we read everything he'd written. It was too much in a summer. I had a wonderful teacher for that, but I was working two jobs, and I was just too tired. I was always worried that I wouldn't be able to go on, that for one reason or another the money would run out, or something would keep me from going to school next year.

Working During School Time

Elliott: So I would always be working. I worked all the time that I went to school. I worked all the way through school, including Cranbrook. I think it would have been nice if I'd had enough faith in myself and in what was happening to say, "I will take a year off and I'll earn some money and see if I can then go to school and be able to focus on it." But somehow, I wasn't able to do that. I just wasn't sure that it would be possible for me to go on, so I worked.

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Nathan: You were working a couple of jobs in order to have enough money?

Elliott: Right. In the summers I was always doing day camp with kids, and I was then also taking classes. During the year, I taught drama

classes to teenagers. I had kids from nine through, I think, fourteen. They wrote their own plays and performed them. I did things with puppets. This was not something I was particularly interested in doing. It was just that I could do it, and I could earn some money doing it.

I taught Hebrew on Sunday mornings at a temple that didn't have Hebrew as part of their regular program. I had decided when I was fourteen, which is an unusual time to do that, that I wanted to learn Hebrew. I hadn't gone to Hebrew school, so I then started Hebrew school when most kids were quitting. My parents had left it as a choice for us. I had not done it earlier, and suddenly felt that I'd missed something. So I went to Hebrew school then, and became quite interested in it.

While I was in high school, I took a class in college, at Wayne at night in conversational Hebrew. My sister was in the class, and I thought it would be nice to do that. So I got a B.A. instead of a B.S. because I had two years of Hebrew before I started college, which was the way, somehow, that I have done things. I think it's just packing it in too much all at once. It was nice to be able to teach Hebrew. Raymond Sokoloff, who writes food columns in the *New York Times*--and is writing for *Natural History Magazine* now--was one of the students that I had. He was very interested in literature, and enjoyed being precocious. I remember at the time he was reading *Brothers Karamazov*, and we would sit and talk about it [laughs].

Nathan: Right. You were really working your way through.

Elliott: Yes.

Studying Hebrew and Jewish History (1949-1950)

Nathan: As you went through college, did any of your eventual career become more clear?

Elliott: No. I took some time off when I was, I guess, a sophomore. It was 1949-1950. After my freshman year, I had the chance to go to New York to live at the Jewish Teachers' Institute for a year. It was not actually a program sponsored by the Jewish Teachers' Institute, but by an organization called Habonim. That was a labor Zionist organization which I belonged to. I could go there for six months and have a rather intensive course in Hebrew and Jewish History, and it was interesting for many reasons.

There were thirty of us, and we lived on a collective budget. It was like a commune before communes became fashionable.

Nathan: Girls and boys?

Elliott: Both, right. We lived within the dorm set-up of the Jewish Teachers' Institute, which they had rented out to us. I think, for me, it gave me my taste of what people were doing later on when they lived on communal budgets, and I could understand it. It was a little like a summer camp, but it was a very worthwhile experience for a number of reasons.

One was that the classes were interesting. We had people who didn't usually teach there, but who came to teach a particular class that they were experienced in. We met all kinds of people that were quite exciting. The most wonderful thing for me was that I could go on Saturdays and Sundays and see the galleries, be exposed suddenly to what was happening in the art world. That was thrilling, and it wouldn't have happened any other way.

I wouldn't have known how to leave home. I didn't have quite enough money to ever manage that, and I was always in the middle of other programs. That was very exciting. I have a friend who was at that time going to the Art Students League, and another who was going to Parsons. These were people I had known at Cass Tech who had gone on to art school there.

Finding a Vocation

Elliott: I remember, after several months, the end of the program, going to the annual student show at Parsons School of Art, and suddenly beginning to weep because I wasn't doing art work. I realized that this was stupid on my part, that I really needed to go home and study. I needed to have more study in art.

Nathan: You were saying how smitten you were because you weren't doing your art. That must have given you a clue about your calling.

Elliott: Oh, yes. Yes, right. I think I had felt before, since I had done well in school except in math, maybe I should choose something else; you know, where people would take you more seriously. But I didn't. I thought about sociology; or I thought about languages. This is without ever having tried them. But, sociology at that time had a prerec [prerequisite], a requirement in math and...

Nathan: Statistics?

Elliott: [laughs] That scared the hell out of me. It just simply never happened. I just wanted to take art classes. I had thought about doing some drama, I was interested in that, but all the art classes were studio classes. Well, not all, but a good number of them were studio classes, and the theater classes were at about the same time.

They were also three hours at a time, so you couldn't take both. I would go over periodically to the Drama Department-- because it was a wonderful Drama Department at Wayne--and see whether or not, in fact, there was some way that I could do this. But they were always at the same time when the necessary art classes took place.

A Major in Art Education

Elliott: When I got to my senior year, my mother was getting worried about what I was going to do, and she really felt I should study something with which I could support myself. I was annoyed about it, but felt that she was right. I then enrolled in the Art Education Program, where I was somewhat suspect, because I was very good at studio art classes, and a lot of the people in Art Ed were not. They were interested in teaching art, but they weren't especially good at art work themselves. You would think that they would be happy to have somebody who was very good at art in the program, but it wasn't necessarily so.

Most of the people who were art majors, fine arts majors, graduated and came back for an additional year to get a teaching credential. I wasn't sure I had that much time, and I just crammed my schedule full of classes so that I could take a major in art [with a B.A. degree], as well as in Art Ed.

The Art Ed major was one where you had to have something like fifteen or so hours in fine arts, but I took more than twenty. You had to have twenty hours in Art Ed and twenty in Education. You also student-taught for a year and a half, all different grades, from K to 12, at elementary, junior high, and high school, one day a week or two half days a week. I found it hard, but I thought it was terribly, sort of revealing and important as a way for me to know myself.

Nathan: I see.

Teaching in Someone Else's Classroom

Elliott: It was very hard to be teaching in someone else's classroom, and trying to teach in a way that was personal to me.

I was comfortable with kids. I'd worked with kids for a long time, so people would recognize that. I hadn't taught in a formal situation, and I needed help with that. The first contact with a class I had, the teacher was so pleased to see that I was comfortable in the class that she left me alone in it.

It was a school that was in a very rough neighborhood. The class was in the basement. It was very dark. It was a third grade class. I didn't know how to control it, and it went crazy. Afterward, I thought, "My God, how could this happen?" It should never have happened. The teacher should never have left me alone with the class. I thought at the time, "Do I really want to teach [laughs] if this had happened?"

I remember leaving. It was a terrible experience. When the class was making a lot of noise the principal came in and asked the class who had started the trouble. All the kids in the class pointed to one little girl. The principal lifted her, this poor child, in the air and shook her and said, oh, awful things. I thought to myself, "I just don't know if this is for me at all," but I couldn't imagine an alternative. I just didn't know what else I could do, so I stayed with it, and graduated in it.

II ART SHOWS, AWARDS, STUDIES

Nathan: It sounded as though you had early recognition of your talents. In 1954 there at Detroit Institute of Arts, you had a purchase award. Was that an important recognition?

Elliott: To get an award [the Smith Prize] in the Michigan Artists Exhibition is a very prestigious thing.

Nathan: You were at Cranbrook, right?

Elliott: Yes. I was a student at Cranbrook then. There were two very big art shows in Michigan: the Michigan Artists Exhibition and the Michigan Craftsmen's Exhibit. I had had some encouragement to exhibit and I'd had a couple of solo shows. I had a show at a small gallery called Chikurin, which was owned by Bob Hanamura, who now lives here.

I had two shows at his small gallery, and I showed at various other places -- printed textiles and other things. It was really nice for me to have done this serigraph, "Phoenix," and to have won the print purchase award at the Detroit Art Institute: the Hal H. Smith Memorial Prize, purchase award for a print, for the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts.

The Cranbrook Experience (1953-1955)

Nathan: When did you have time to do this? Was this fun?

Elliott: [laughs] I've always been somewhat driven, so I work very hard. I went to Cranbrook Academy of Art one summer while I was still an undergraduate. I had saved my money all year to go. I studied weaving at the time, that summer. I was terribly disappointed. I felt that there weren't people around to talk to about books and about ideas.

It would have been okay if I had a car so I could have gotten away from the place. But, you were sort of in this ivory tower, where nobody really was reading the newspapers or reading books. A lot of people who taught public school during the year came there in the summer. Everybody had convinced themselves that this was the most wonderful place on earth. I really didn't feel that it was the most wonderful place on earth. The people in the weaving studio seemed terribly narrow to me. It was, at that time, very much the Bauhaus approach. And the person who normally taught during the year, Marianne Strengell, was not there.

The technician, Bill Sparr, who ran the power loom and worked for her was a very sweet man. He was the one teaching, but he really didn't know anything about textiles as art. He knew about them in terms of industry. I couldn't understand why I wasn't doing better at it. There was enormous pressure to produce a great number of examples, and I only found out at the end of the summer, that one other person and I were the only ones who didn't know how to weave in the beginning. We were beginners. Everyone else taught weaving during the year, and I hadn't known that. Nobody knew that. They acted as though they were learning it the way he was teaching it, and nobody said that they had ever woven before. We worked on very complicated looms which I still think is a terrible mistake. They were contra-marche looms.

Nathan: Contra-marche?

Elliott: Contra, and then hyphen M-A-R-C-H-E. I think that's the way it's spelled. They were very complicated, heavy looms, and I was never very interested in doing production weaving. I loved yarn and colors in yarn; saturated colors are very exciting to me. I thought it would be wonderful to do something that you did with painting, and do with yarn.

That wasn't the emphasis there. I hadn't known that before. I found I was very lonely, and not very successful, because I couldn't figure out why I couldn't understand what was going on with the looms. I spent a good deal of my time on the floor tying up the looms. I worked very hard, and I didn't feel that I liked much of what I was doing. It was early to be doing what I was doing, because I was spending a lot of time on each sample, putting in threads individually and playing around with it. At the time, that was crazy to most of the people there.

They really felt you wove very rhythmically, and enjoyed the rhythm and somehow the pleasure of the weaving itself. I wasn't doing that. So I felt I really didn't belong there. I left that summer feeling that I had made a mistake, that you

couldn't do with weaving what I had in mind. I didn't weave for another ten years. Later on when I decided I wanted to weave again, I contacted Janice (Bornt) Langdon.

She had been at Cranbrook when I was there. At that time, Cranbrook was undergraduate, graduate and assorted. She had just come for a year but she wasn't working toward a degree.

I remembered her when I met her out here. When I moved out to California, I asked her if she'd teach me to warp again. She knew that I had been weaving before, and couldn't really believe that I couldn't remember it, but I had really totally wiped it out of my mind.

Nathan: Did you then go back to Cranbrook and get a degree?

Elliott: Well, yes, the weaving was while I was an undergraduate at Wayne. I went to Cranbrook (1953-1955) because it was local, and because I wanted to go someplace else besides Wayne. Then I came back later and studied ceramics and minored in painting. I would have majored in painting, which was my major interest then, painting or print making, but I didn't like the painting that was done there. The direction was set by the head of the painting department.

Nathan: Was it Zoltan?

Elliott: Zoltan Sepeshy. He was an interesting man, very interesting. But his paintings were in egg tempera, and it wasn't the kind of painting I was interested in. The other person who taught painting then was Wally Mitchell. I had taken ceramics as an undergraduate, and decided I liked that quite a lot. I hadn't expected to like it. I took a class first in the Art Ed Department. It was taught as a Mickey Mouse class, and I decided it wasn't what I wanted. I had a good friend who said I should really try taking the class with William Pitney in the Art Department, and I did. I took it for a year and I liked it a lot. I'd never wanted to do ceramics before, and suddenly I thought that it was really compelling.

Nathan: Did you throw on the wheel?

Elliott: Yes, but my hand building was better, and I should have stayed with that. But I didn't know then. When I went to Cranbrook, I knew I didn't want to study weaving there. I had studied design there, but I knew the emphasis there was on designing furniture, refrigerators, and cars, and I was not interested in that aspect of design. The summer I had studied design there, I had printed on cloth, but that was very unusual. During the year textile printing was taught in the weaving area.

Ceramics with Maja Grotell

Elliott: So I decided not weaving, not design, not painting. The person who taught ceramics, everyone thought very highly of, and I thought the ceramics there were very good. So I studied with Maja Grotell. And she was probably the most important and lasting influence from Cranbrook.

Nathan: So, the ceramics would include glaze?

Elliott: Everything.

Nathan: Everything. Firing, everything?

Elliott: Right, and I learned how to calculate glazes, but not because Maja taught it. You worked very much on your own. But I think what I learned from her was that I could be self-directed completely. I had been before anyway, but she was very silent. She was almost entirely silent, so that there was this terrible pressure you felt to perform well. She had a great deal of integrity in her own work. You felt that honesty.

Nathan: When you were teaching art in various aspects, was that your style, to be silent?

Elliott: No. No, I think that was awfully hard on me, and I think it's just too hard. If you think you have something you can teach, I think students certainly have a right to know it if they're interested in things. I think the teacher has the obligation to make it easier for the student, than just if they were going to be involved working on their own.

It was the integrity, I suppose, I learned. Well, I think maybe by that time, she was ill. She was important for everyone who studied with her, but I think by the time I studied with her, she was not talking very much at all, and was more and more reclusive. I wasn't so zippy and skilled that I distinguished myself.

I remember the first term, I worked very hard on the wheel, and I was having great trouble there. I was in a new place, and different kinds of wheels. I was just never that good at throwing on the wheel. I should have done hand building which I was very good at. I was very good at decorating and the design of the pot. For me at that time, the form by itself was really the foil for putting the design on it.

Maja, after a whole term, came up to me and said, "I feel I've been neglecting you." I had felt that she'd been neglecting me; she hadn't said anything. By her silence, you felt her presence, but you felt somehow you weren't adequate. I think I learned a lot from Maja, but I don't feel that that should have to be part of the learning process. I think the teacher can, in fact, make it, set it up for the student so that you feel that you are accomplishing something. You can see what you're accomplishing. You can measure it for yourself or with the teacher against what you're able to do. So I don't think that was what I learned from her.

Nathan: What a painful experience.

Elliott: Yes, it was painful. It was painful, and yet I know people, other people, who learned from her. Many other people talk about Maja. I'm sure that she must have been quite different in a different time.

The Past and the Future

Nathan: Did you know about your predecessor students? Did you know about Cranbrook?

Elliott: No, Cranbrook was this crazy place where there was only the present. It had no past.

Nathan: Ah. Existential somehow?

Elliott: Yes. In a way, it didn't even have a future. It had a today. Art was discovered yesterday. That has now become much more common. Or not even yesterday, this morning, maybe, and so you didn't learn about history. Marianne Strengell was the weaving instructor at Cranbrook. I didn't have much to do with her. I wanted to use a loom, and she allowed me to use a loom for a short time until she needed it. I was interested in seeing what the weaving students produced, but had no desire to study weaving again there.

She had studied very traditionally in Sweden. She was Finnish as well; she and Maja were both Finnish. She had studied all of the traditional stuff and felt that she was liberated from it, had liberated herself from it, so she didn't teach anything of what she had had to learn. She only taught twill and tabby. She was very high-powered, working for industry.

Individual Studios

Elliott: In general the potters or weavers seemed to stay together. We were within one particular group of students, although I spent time in the painting department. That was strange because it was so different from pottery, where there was always something you needed to do. You needed to mix up clay or mix up glazes. But in the painting department, everybody seemed to want their own little cubicle and be separate. It seemed very strange to me after coming from a city college like Wayne. Wayne at that time was a city college, and not a state college. Everybody at Wayne talked about ideas and about what they were doing. They often congregated.

At Cranbrook it was all quite isolated. All the painters wanted a separate private studio. I was living at home, so I was really separate from the student body that lived there. Cranbrook had only about 125 students, including day students. It was a very narrow, you know, a very small school.

There are still friends, very good friends of mine that I made while I was at Cranbrook. But within any one time, you could find about four or five people there that you really enjoyed being around. You didn't see half of the people. They were involved in other areas, especially if you weren't living there and eating all the meals there. I would come there for the day.

But I worked hard, and I felt that my pottery improved, and so did my painting. I learned something about an approach to one's work and how important it was. I met some people that mattered to me, and that's a lot, in fact.

Nathan: It is, strung out over time. I was thinking of the silent student body. You didn't need a silent teacher. That was strange.

Elliott: Yes, it was a very strange thing. The students weren't silent; I mean, there were people within it that I had contact with. But I had lived at Cranbrook that one summer, and decided that I really didn't want to do that. Not only was it terribly expensive, but I wanted really to be with people, with other people. So I was happier to go back and be with the friends I knew in town who did things.

Nathan: Read the paper?

Elliott: Yes. I was not that aware, involved in current events. I wasn't so political. But I really found it terribly hard. Everybody else found it an advantage to be outside of the world. I felt I was only one of a couple of people in the library, ever. There's a wonderful library, but there's nobody, very few people in it. So, it wasn't exactly my style.

Nathan: That was interesting. I wondered if whether your seeing some of your teachers working, doing industrial design affected you.

Elliott: I know now that a number of teachers including Marianne Strengell did work, but I never saw any of it then, and I wasn't really aware of it then. Maja was not part of that at all.

Nathan: I see.

Elliott: Not at all.

Nathan: Did that awaken any interest in you that finally led you to your work at Ford?

Elliott: No. No, not at all. And I didn't actually know what Marianne was doing. I just knew that she was doing her own work. She had people come to look at her designs. She was very efficient and brusque in manner and all. I didn't know what it was that she was doing until later. Maja was not at all like that. She worked very privately and we never saw anything that she did, or rarely.

And yet you felt that there was something--.

Focusing##

Elliott: It was so astounding to me that Maja had eliminated everything. She didn't want to have plants because they would require some responsibility on her part. She didn't want to have anything dependent on her. She'd eliminated all the books in her library, except those on ceramics. I mean it was a focusing in that was incredible. I don't know if she felt that she didn't have enough time or energy to do those things.

It was strange, because she was kind of a contradiction. She'd come from Finland. She'd worked in New York City, which she adored. She loved 42nd Street. It was a bizarre notion, that this person who was sort of ponderous and silent just loved New York City. She had worked at a place in New York where she

taught ceramics when she first came, a settlement house. She found New York terribly exciting.

Nathan: Maybe she thought it was too seductive, do you think? Did she have time or the wish for closeness with friends?

Elliott: She saw some people who were at Cranbrook, but she didn't have many friends that I knew of. Her private life was very private. We really didn't know that. I particularly didn't, because I wasn't there in the evenings. I know there were people who knew her better than I, but I don't know whether it was just that I had some trouble being with her. I felt that she was strange and interesting.

One day she had a newspaper out on a table and somebody said, "Is this Finnish or Swedish?" She said, "It's been there for a whole week, and finally somebody's asked." I thought, "How strange. If she wanted to tell us, why didn't she tell us?" You didn't ever know what you had done wrong, and you didn't ever know what she wanted. It was kind of a crazy psychological set-up. I feel as though I'm saying something awful, because everybody so worshipped Maja, and she was an extraordinary person.

Nathan: Yes. That whole question for you of art, not art in the marketplace, but art for its own sake. Interesting. It was an experience for you to perceive this?

Elliott: Right. It was very interesting. I was glad that I chose to study ceramics there and to study with Maja. My painting teacher, Wally Mitchell, thought I should be a painting major. That was nice for me, because it was nice to be recognized. I didn't think I wanted to continue to study with him. There wasn't another teacher for students who were minoring in painting. So it was okay just to come and draw there a couple of days a week.

Nathan: Was Black Mountain in operation at this time?

Elliott: Yes, it was, but it was one of those places that was like a fantasy. You know, it sounded very interesting. I had thought that I might like to go to study print making there, because I knew there was exciting print making going on there. There was another place. I think maybe it was Iowa, where there was a lot of experimental poetry and print making done. I thought that that sounded quite exciting to me.

None of them were really possible. There weren't really options; there weren't choices. While I was going to Cranbrook I had a job, and I could work in town ordering art supplies and

doing stage props and backdrops, and teaching art to kids in Hebrew school. The Hebrew school had a number of branch schools, perhaps twelve or fifteen of them. I directed the teachers and helped them teach art and use art in the classes. Sometimes I taught projects to the kids as well.

Nathan: Well that sounds like a full life by itself.

Elliott: The thing was that I could adjust my hours. That was the advantage of the school, of teaching in the Hebrew schools. It was a secular after-school Hebrew school, one where I had studied. The job was a good job, because some weeks I would have to work very hard, and some weeks I could adjust the hours and just work at night.

But I worked very hard at Cranbrook. I went there every day. I didn't have a car at the beginning, so first I rode with someone. For a long period, I took Greyhound buses out there, and then walked the half mile up the road. It was worth going. I felt I had learned a lot. I couldn't think of where else I could go.

Travel, and Ceramics at Graduate School

Nathan: Were you at this point beginning to think you needed to get on with your life and settle into a more professional mode?

Elliott: Well actually, I had gone to Europe and to Israel after I graduated from college, from Wayne. I went for five months. I worked a couple of jobs, saved some money, and went. I had the possibility of teaching right after college, and I decided I really wasn't ready for it. There were three schools in the inner city, at each one, a couple of days, and it just seemed to me that I was really not ready to do that. So I went.

Nathan: What did that do for you, getting out?

Elliott: Well, it was just wonderful. I went alone in 1952, which was early.

Nathan: On a charter?

Elliott: No, well it was a charter flight, but I wasn't part of it or any tour. It was very exciting. But at the end of five months, I felt that I wanted very much to study in earnest. Everybody else in the world had a place, and had something that they could do. I'm not idle by nature, and I felt I really wanted to become an

expert at something. All these things that I knew how to do very well, but I needed to know more. I planned to study ceramics.

That was why I came back and decided to go to graduate school. I really didn't care particularly about getting a degree. I just felt I needed to know more about ceramics, or painting, or whatever it was I was going to be doing. Of course, if you come back and study for a couple of years, it doesn't mean you know nearly all you can know about ceramics, even in one limited temperature range.

I didn't think I was going to be getting a degree. I was just studying because I wanted to learn more about ceramics. But it turned out, I fulfilled the obligations, so I got the Master's Degree. I got an M.F.A.

III STYLING TEXTILES FOR FORD AT DEARBORN (1956-1959), AND TURNING TO TEACHING

Nathan: You actually did get into industry, didn't you?

Elliott: Right. I looked around for work, and it was very hard at the time. It was one of many recessions in Detroit. It was trying. I didn't find anything, and I couldn't figure out what I could do. I thought I would not like to teach at that point.

So I looked around, and I got a job doing drafting. I'm not a draftsman at all, that's not my skill. That's not what I do. But I needed a job, and so I worked at a job shop which did things for industry, hired itself out to various companies. I learned a little bit about drafting. That was temporary. It was for a couple of months. At the job shop I was doing work, actually, on Chevies. They were revising the tail lights, or something. This was in 1955.

After that, I was really just not sure where I was going to look for work. I sent out letters applying for jobs teaching ceramics, but at the time, there weren't many jobs for women in ceramics. I wasn't particularly a technician. That is, it would be hard for me to go and set up a whole ceramics department someplace. That wasn't my strength. I was just not sure where I was going to go.

So I talked with a number of friends all over. We talked about what jobs they knew about. One friend of mine suggested that I might try the automotive companies, and so I did, and I got the job at Ford. The same day I got the job at Ford Motor Company in styling, I was offered a job at G.M. in styling.

There's this crazy business where I don't think either company really wanted to have a stylist, a textile stylist, an interior stylist who was specializing in textiles, but neither one wanted the other company to have one. You know.

Nathan: Great.

Elliott: It was the first time I was able to earn enough money so I could move out of my parents' home and get an apartment, which I did in the middle of Detroit, near Wayne. That's where I met my husband. He was teaching at Wayne for the year.

Nathan: When you applied, did you have a portfolio?

Elliott: Yes, I had. You know, I was just applying. I didn't know if it would be in textiles or what. I brought along the weavings that I had done that one summer. The vice-president of styling at that time was John Walker. He was rather adventurous in terms of design. He saw me in the waiting room and looked at the designs and was very interested. It turned out that they had actually been looking for a person who was a textile designer.

First Woman Designer

Elliott: They had sent it to all the art schools--but I hadn't ever seen it--particularly on the East Coast, where there were textile departments which focused on designing for industry, like Rhode Island School of Design and Parsons.

I got the job working in the Lincoln-Mercury Division. After I was there, it turned out, I was the first designer, first woman designer in the whole styling division. They had had no women. They had a thousand stylists, and no women. Just secretaries. They didn't exactly know what to do with me, where to put me, you know, whether I should be in exterior styling or interior. They just didn't know what to do with a woman who wasn't a secretary there. Hiring me turned out to really be part of an advertising campaign, which was that women selected or bought cars so women should also design them.

That year, we met with the press a great deal. They hired four other women after I was there, one for each of the divisions at Ford Motor Company: Edsel, The Advanced Studio, Ford, and I was Lincoln-Mercury. Maybe Lincoln Continental had a designer, but anyway, we had around five. I stayed for more than three years.

I earned what was considered a very good salary for a woman in that time. I was able finally to become somewhat independent. At the end of that period there were several major lay-offs. I found it was a very difficult place for people to work because no one quite trusted anybody else; everybody wanted to make sure that he stayed. Every year there was a major lay-off. Everybody

would say, "Oh well, we got rid of the dead wood. Now we'll be able to carry on." It was very dehumanizing.

The Office Culture

Elliott: It was a terribly hard place to look at people and see human relationships, under that kind of severe oppression. You were paid well, but often people felt that they needed to buy themselves things or to go on wonderful vacations to make it possible for them to do their job during the year.

People in styling felt that they were not part of the working class. They wouldn't carry a lunchbox. They wanted to distinguish themselves from the rest of the factory. There were all these things that were going on that I'd never seen before, and awful slang terms for all other people that I'd never heard of in my life. Never part of anything I'd ever heard. It was horrifying, the terminology that people used for one another. Just awful.

Nathan: Racial?

Elliott: Racial slurs. They were so awful, I couldn't believe it; I couldn't figure this out. It was very painful in some ways, and yet, this was a job. It depended very much on the particular office you were in, and who you happened to be working with. Nobody was really interested in using new designs. The people who made the decisions were not those who had any training in art, so there was a great deal of frustration attached to it. At first it was frustrating, and then I decided I would make the best designs I knew how to make and set it up for myself.

Nathan: Were you given a general framework with your criteria?

Elliott: No. There was almost nothing given to us, I mean any of us. I eventually figured it out. Designers would come from the mills, and they would look at our designs. They would be very interested. Each of us worked in a separate studio. There was some contact between us, but we wouldn't really talk about technique, how you might figure out ways of showing designs. But there were really no guidelines.

Occasionally, when I would ask, somebody would look at my designs. The companies, the mills coming through, were interested, but the Styling Division people didn't know how to look at drawings. They knew only how to look at finished cloth. We were making drawings for cloth.

Nathan: I see.

Lay-Off

Elliott: The lay-off finally came after a number of years. A number of lay-offs had come up, we were laid off, and they said, well, maybe at another time they'd be ready for fabric designers. One of my friends who was working there was a woman stylist that I still see--said she thanked them, because she didn't think she would ever have had the courage to leave such a high-paying job. It was wonderful for her to get out, because she was relieved. It wasn't right for her. It wasn't right for me either.

What had happened to all of the other designers that were fabric designers was that they were finally doing things like typing, because they could type, and the division needed somebody always to fill in answering phones and typing. I couldn't type, and wouldn't type; I couldn't, actually. And that was fine. So I was doing much more interesting things, like color matching and doing some lettering.

In fact, they needed fabric designers. It was just that they weren't quite ready for us yet. They did use a few of my designs as part of the planning. But I don't know whether they used them in the final cars.

Nathan: What an interesting experience.

Elliott: It was very interesting. And it made it...It was interesting to see. There was so much talk from the Bauhaus on, about how the artist could influence society, the industry in society. In fact, you were much freer not being part of industry. You could influence industry in many ways more directly if you were not part of it, if you simply were doing your artwork.

There were so many concessions to so many things, and so many people making the decisions that had no background in making those decisions, no training, no experience. They had experience, but it was from the carriage trade or something else. It had nothing to do with today's world or art or the art world.

Learning in the Library

Elliott: So, it was very exciting and interesting, and what I did was, I spent a great deal of time in the Styling Library reading about industrial design, reading about textiles, reading about the commercial world. I learned a lot. I had never been so aware of the design world before; I read everything there. I worked hard, after the initial shock of finding out that nobody really cared what I was doing.

It was also interesting because it was not unionized. The administration was worried that someone might try to set up a union. There was one Black stylist there; he had so many degrees. He was so overqualified, it was funny. In my department, nobody had a college degree, so they somehow worried about those people who had college degrees. With me there, they had a college person and a woman and Jew all together. So they could cross off that token list.

But I got something from it as well. I learned a lot. It was so interesting that they didn't really take advantage of--I don't mean of me only, but of so many people who had talent and skill--and do something that made some sense in terms of something really experimental. That wasn't part of the thinking.

When I left, I was offered a job at one of the mills that I'd had contact with. I decided not to accept the job. It would have meant moving to Canada. I was interested in seeing how all of this worked at Ford's. But it didn't give me much faith in the idea of change.

Industrial Spying and Rules of Conduct

Nathan: Or of efficiency? Interesting adventure.

Elliott: Yes. I have in recent years felt that Ford Motor Company was a small version of...well, it was like Watergate. It was also, I'm told, like some of the departments at a university. Everybody at Ford's knew what G.M. was going to be doing for the next few years. They had their own spies. They would project what they knew the other company was coming out with. The same stylists worked at all of the different places. That's how you got a higher job. You moved from one to another. It was a very interesting time.

Oh, I started to tell you. I smoked, I never have smoked much, but at Ford's, you would sometimes be working under terrific deadlines, and I smoked there irregularly, but to pass the time because that way I could pace out my time.

My boss said, "Whether it's right or whether it's wrong, women don't smoke at Ford's. Haven't you noticed?" I said, "It never occurred to me to look." It never occurred to me to see whether somebody else was smoking. There wasn't another woman in my department. He said, "Well, you have to go over to the Women's Lounge or something. You can't smoke here."

It was just so funny. I'm sure that's all changed now with the feminist movement. It seemed so strange to me. But that was still hanging on from old Henry Ford, his conservative ideas. But it was just funny.

Nathan: It was a slice of the times?

Elliott: That's right. That's right, and I'm happy to have had the chance to have done that. It was a little like having lived in a communal set up, because people tell me about all these things, people who have never worked in industry have this great faith in it. It's just, it's not so.

Nathan: Yes. So when you left Ford, did teaching look better to you then?

Elliott: Well, I started then thinking of what I would do, and decided that if I were teaching, I would teach at a high school, that I could teach some of the things that I knew more reasonably in high school.

Nathan: No more maddened third graders for you.

Elliott: Well, that had really scared me. It was unreasonable that it had happened. The principal was so silly when she came in, and it was awful. Then the critic teacher came running in finally. The principal said, "You are never to leave this class alone again." It was though I were totally invisible. The whole thing was just bizarre. But it really did leave its mark. It's crazy.

I began thinking what else was possible. When I was laid off, I looked at other things. There were things that were possible. I went to Jam Handy and thought they were doing films and that I could do backdrops, flat designs. They were somewhat interested. That didn't quite happen.

Teaching High School in Dearborn (1959-1960)

Elliott: Then I thought, "I still have the teaching credential, and I could do that if I needed to." So, I went around and looked at different places and talked to people, and decided that there was a possibility. I then applied for high school jobs, and I got one teaching in Dearborn. I had not wanted to live in Dearborn, which was where the Ford Motor Company is, because it was a place which really didn't allow different kinds of people in. No Blacks were in Dearborn at all. No Asians, no Mexicans, no Jews. The mayor of Dearborn always prided himself on that fact. It was like the South. I felt on principle, I couldn't live in Dearborn.

So I didn't want to look there for a job. It turned out that the best job that was offered me was teaching high school in Dearborn. I did do that for a year.

Nathan: Were you teaching art?

Elliott: I was teaching art, I taught ceramics, I taught jewelry, drawing, commercial art.

Nathan: How lovely.

Legacy of Dearborn

Elliott: It was nice. Dearborn, where I taught, that part of Dearborn was very upwardly mobile, and all the kids needed, wanted desperately to have very nice cars. It was a little too desperate. The community was working so hard to become upper class. I felt that it was a hard place to be because so many of the kids felt pressured to perform well. Also, there was a great deal of drinking. I mean drinking was a big thing with kids. It wasn't drugs then, but drinking and driving.

Two of my best students were killed the first time they ever took a chance on anything. They took a ride with another student who apparently was drunk and drove recklessly. He was killed, and these two wonderful young students, wonderful students, talented, were killed. That happened to a number of people who were in my classes that year. It just is hideous to think that that's the legacy of Dearborn. I really needed to leave that place.

At the end of a year, I was told that I was the only person who had ever taken Jewish holidays off in Dearborn. I remember I was the only Jew whom my students had ever met. It was a very strange situation.

One of my students who got into serious trouble was in jail, briefly. He had done some prank with other kids where they stole something. The kids in Dearborn never went into Detroit, never went into the adjoining suburbs. They were terrified of Blacks. It was really out of all proportion.

Nathan: You said that imprisoned them?

Elliott: Yes. What it did in terms of segregation for the Blacks was bad, but it was also bad for the whites in Dearborn, because they just didn't know what anybody else was like. It was a crazy thing, living so close to each other and being terrified of "others."

Teaching Art Education at Ann Arbor (1960)

Elliott: So at the end of that year, I met one of my friends from Cranbrook, Marie Woo, who had been teaching ceramics at Ann Arbor, the University of Michigan. She said that she thought that there was a position open there teaching art education. She wondered if I might be interested. So I applied and got it. It was interesting because I think the pay was less than it had been at high school, but I was very pleased to somehow move on to another thing and another age level.

I taught there. The program was an interesting one. When I went to Wayne, there was terrible antagonism between the Art Education Department and the Fine Arts Department, which made it difficult for me. At Ann Arbor, the Art Education Department was part of the Fine Arts Department. I hated the Art Education Department I had studied in. Classes had been incredibly boring, and without any substance. I decided that I would have to teach this with some devotion to teaching, so that people wouldn't just waste their time getting through it. So, at Ann Arbor, I worked very hard to make the classes interesting. All of these people were art majors who never had had classes in anything but painting and sculpture. They knew nothing about teaching art; not only not teaching art, but they'd never had any of the craft areas. So my job really was to do that. I taught another class for non-art majors, for all the people involved in education who had never done any artwork. There was a school principal in the class, and a music teacher and many classroom teachers.

It was a very exciting time in terms of my classes. My husband sat in on one. He was a wonderful student. We were not married at the time.

Nathan: Were you giving them art history at the same time?

Elliott: No. They had lots of art history. There was a wonderful Art History Department there. I was teaching them to do art work. I was not teaching ceramics, but I was teaching fiber, an approach to fiber, doing printing and weaving a little, because it was just part of the class; jewelry and two-dimensional design and three-dimensional design. I had a killing schedule. It was very hard. I was very much low man on the totem pole, and I was really overloaded.

But it was okay, you know, I felt I did a good job. I did that, and then at the end of the school year, my husband Roy and I were married.

IV THE MOVE TO CALIFORNIA (1960): ART AND TEACHING##

Nathan: You were saying that you had gotten married.

Elliott: In June. We moved out even though neither of us had a job in California. We decided we'd move.

Seeking Warmth and Jobs

Nathan: How did you know that you wanted to go to California?

Elliott: Well, that last winter in Detroit was so cold. I really hated the cold weather, and I think I was ready to move on. California was the Promised Land. Roy's parents had moved out here when they retired, and they were in Sierra Madre. So we thought we'd probably move to Los Angeles, since we thought it was warmer than San Francisco. But, when we moved there, it was so hard to look for jobs because all of the places were so scattered, that we came to visit Roy's brother, who was in San Francisco. It was so much easier getting around, that we decided to stay and look for work here. I couldn't find anything. It was 1960, and jobs were scarce. In Detroit, there was a terrible recession at that time. Here, there was nothing in terms of work for me. Roy had almost finished his Ph.D.

Nathan: What is his field?

Elliott: He's in economics.

Nathan: I see.

Elliott: He had done all of the work for it, but he needed to just finish the thesis, and he had one or two chapters to go. It just got delayed for a long time. He couldn't find the books he needed in the libraries here where we moved. His degree was from the University of Chicago. He was just looking for work in any area

he could do work in. There were no teaching jobs available for him.'

Well, finally Roy got a job as a statistician. I looked for a very long time, and there was nothing available for me at all. I'm one of these very dogged people who make out long lists of possibilities and cross them off and start the next day with a whole new list, hopeful. I did this for a very long time, like three months. There was just simply nothing.

Finally, I think I drove Roy crazy, and he said, "You know, there isn't anything. It's clear there isn't anything. Why don't you do the work that you want to do? There's nothing, you're not finding anything. Just do some work that you've always wanted to do."

So it was the first time ever that I had worked on my own work, and didn't have a job at the same time. Ever. So I did spend a couple of years, or three years I guess, doing that, and did a lot of work.

Nathan: Was this in fiber?

Elliott: Well, I had thought I'd do ceramics, but I didn't have a kiln. I did take a class with Roy Walker at San Francisco City College so that I could use the kiln. I spoke with Roy Walker and he was willing to have me in class. I assisted him occasionally when he was busy. It took several buses to get there and hours of time. I guess finally, it was clear that it was just too complicated. It was too hard I couldn't find anybody who might share a kiln. We didn't have money to set up a studio.

Embroidered Textiles, and Tapestries

Elliott: I had been doing work at home. I got so excited about the projects at Ann Arbor that I had assigned, that I decided to do those projects. I think it was still in Michigan, I'd begun working on some framed embroidered textiles, and I continued working in that direction, and then someone had a loom that was available; I bought it. That was when I learned to weave again, and began doing tapestries.

Nathan: I see.

Elliott: I was worried, you know, that finally, after all this time of hoping to do artwork, and to really have the time, what if, in fact, I couldn't do anything.

Nathan: That's terrifying.

Elliott: Yes it was. Absolutely terrifying. I thought, "What if I have nothing to say? What if this doesn't work?" We didn't have a phone. Well, we eventually got a phone, but we didn't have a radio. I didn't know anyone anywhere around. Roy, when he found a job, went off to work. We were on Potrero Hill, where you couldn't take a walk very easily, because everything was so steep.

But then, finally I loved it. I resented brushing my teeth in the morning. I just wanted to do work. I worked for a while. I couldn't enter shows because there were no categories for embroidery, or for the kinds of textiles I was doing.

Recognition: Oakland, Seattle, Richmond (1964)

Elliott: There was a show in 1964. There was a show at the Oakland Museum; I won several honorable mentions. Then there was a show in Seattle, where I won the Purchase Award.

Nathan: How wonderful.

Elliott: So, things suddenly seemed possible.

Nathan: These were not miniatures. These were...

Elliott: 24" by 26". Some were embroidered larger hangings that were two or three yards long.

And then I won an award in the Richmond Craftsmen's show. Rudy Turk, who was the director of the Richmond Art Center at that time, invited me to have a one-person show. He was very important on the art scene here. He invited many new artists to have solo shows. I was very pleased. It was very exciting for me. Gervais Reed, one of the people who had been a juror for the show in 1964 at the Oakland Museum--it was the last major crafts show they had, I think--he invited me to have a show at the University of Washington Henry Gallery.

At this time, I was very pleased to be asked if I wanted to teach a class at Berkeley. Suddenly, it was as though things were beginning to work for me.

Nathan: Yes. Could I go back? We don't have to pick it up here. We can do it later, if you would like to, but at one point, you had

thought that liberal arts were important to artists, that literature was significant. Would you want to do this now, or later?

What an Artist Needs to Know

Elliott: That's fine. You know I had thought originally I would go to an art school, but the English classes had been so important for me. They were really what woke me up and made me re-evaluate and re-think a lot of things I had thought before. Travelling alone had done some of that.

I felt that the art schools often seemed narrow to me, even though people were sometimes very accomplished. It really seemed as though you were missing a lot if you didn't go to college. I recommend that to students. I remember hearing a famous cellist talk about how he had a patron, and the patron felt in order for him to play beautifully, he not only needed to know how to play the cello, but he needed to be educated. I feel that that's really important, so I really think that the liberal arts matter a great deal, and not just the techniques.

I think that studying art in any medium is very much like studying art in any other medium. There are things that you need to learn that are specific to that technique, or to that material and those techniques are essential. But if you've studied art, that's a lot. It's not just deciding to do textiles today. I think that knowing, and having studied a lot about design and about drawing carries you far in any material that you want to work in. I object to the idea that it's sort of Step 1, 2, 3; that it has to be sequential in a particular way.

Nathan: Thank you, I'm glad to hear that.

Consultant to the Getty Conference

Elliott: I went to a conference just last week, the Getty Conference; I'm working for them as a consultant.

Nathan: Oh, are you?

Elliott: Artist consultant. It's just a couple of times a year for two years. There was an awful lot of discussion about sequential art things and basics, and basic education. I tremble when I hear

that, because I don't know what somebody else's basics are, compared to my basics. Fads and fashions change so much in what is important, what is essential, and what is basic, that it just worries me when somebody thinks that there are these necessary basics, like the tables of the law, that you have to have learned. Otherwise you don't know anything.

I feel that people who come to art from other areas maybe aren't as skilled in terms of technique, and it takes them a long time to begin to understand what happens in art or in drawing or in weaving. But they have learned something too, which serves them well in whatever it is that they're working in.

I was doing poster contests in high school. I remember talking to two friends of mine who were in art, and we all shared many of the same ideas about what the posters would do. It was most exciting to me to look not at art magazines, but at other magazines and talk to people who were in other disciplines, in terms of thinking of new ideas.

Though I think it's very important to have a lot of art training. I just am afraid when I see this "basic" thing. I think that the two-year training in design that most of the art schools have, or the general art training, is fine. Or if you have somebody teaching anything, who knows that it doesn't matter how you hold your hands but what's in your mind. [phone rings]

That is fine, that's basic for me. There isn't any one thing that has to have been studied in a particular way. [phone still ringing]

Would you mind if I get that? Excuse me. [answers phone, tape turned off]

Nathan: You're suggesting in a way that it isn't "art by the numbers," but that it's your whole life?

Elliott: Oh, yes, absolutely.

Nathan: I was struck by your sense that everything influences and is used by your art.

Elliott: Right. Absolutely. It was just like, I mean, like my choice at Cranbrook. It didn't have to be painting, even though I was doing painting, had been doing painting before I started there. I have the same attitude about the work I do, whether it's painting or print making, or weaving. That's one of the reasons why it's so irritating when the art critics aren't interested if it's textiles. Whereas they might take it seriously if it were done in another medium.

Painters are about the worst in terms of this. I remember a friend of mine who was a good painter, looked at some print I had done once and said, "But if you can do this, why are you doing textiles?" It was just outrageous, the hierarchy of importance that some people put on what they decide matters.

Teaching by Inspiration at UC (1966-1971)

Nathan: Of course. Well, I'm happy to have that explanation. So you then got to Cal, and you were in the Department of Design [1966-1971].

Elliott: That's right. I thought I would just teach there for one year. The decision had already been made to phase out the department. I received a call, I think it was from Lea Miller, asking me to come to the Design Department, and I really didn't understand that it was for teaching. I had sort of given up on jobs at that time. I thought it was probably to participate in an exhibit or something.

I came down, and I did, in fact, then meet Lea Miller, and Ed Rossbach and Katherine [Westphal]. I was offered a job teaching weaving, I think it was just for that term, or maybe that semester. It was still the semester system. I really was shocked. I didn't expect that at that time.

Lea Miller was retiring at that time, and I was very pleased to have the job. I needed the job then, and I thought I would just do it for a brief time, like a year or a term, if that was it, because we could use money for that time.

What I did get from it was not just that. I mean, the money was wonderful but I had decided after Ann Arbor, where I'd had such a terrible schedule, that I really didn't want to teach, that there was so much bureaucracy going on with the teaching, and so much paperwork, that it was not what I wanted to do.

When I taught with Ed Rossbach, I saw that it was possible to teach, and not have it all be petty and stupid. It was the first time I'd seen anybody teach in a way that I really respected. I was very grateful to him for that. That was the most important thing that I had gotten from teaching with him, or teaching at Cal. It was not only the salary, but seeing that you can really teach. People learned in his classes because they wanted to. They were so impressed with him. They suddenly wanted to please him; not only to please him.

They suddenly had this great faith, because he had faith in them that they could do beautiful things. When they saw what they did, they were delighted. It made them do work that they never had imagined that they could do. It was wonderful. I was enormously impressed that we weren't just passing out locker numbers and just taking care of garbage. It was real, it mattered. You could talk about things that mattered. It was very wonderful for me.

Studying Weaving with Kay Sekimachi

Elliott: I just had my oldest child, Jeremy, at the end of August (August 30, 1965). I began teaching in January, and I was very worried beforehand, because I had never taught weaving. I had taught very simple kinds of weaving at Ann Arbor in that one class, but I had never studied weaving in a way that I liked. Then the idea that I would be also teaching it was very scary for me.

I took a class then, a very traditional weaving class several hours a week for two months.

Nathan: Where were you?

Elliott: At Berkeley Adult School with Kay Sekimachi. My husband was in the class. He had decided he would take a weaving class, because he had put looms together for me, and he thought he would like to see how they worked. I really am a great believer in having people learn other than from their spouse. He's somewhat mathematical, and Kay's work was much more like that. So I took the class to just see another way to approach weaving. I knew I could teach people who were like me. I wanted to know how I could teach people who were not like me.

I learned her way. It was a little more complicated than I felt I needed. Janice (Bornt) Langdon's system of warping was simpler, but I was very interested to know how to reach people who were different from me. I did learn just by seeing that. But I learned very much more later from the way in which Ed Rossbach taught his classes in terms of what students went ahead and did, and how they regarded themselves. It was a very interesting experience for me.

Nathan: Yes. Teaching by inspiration is harder than teaching one-two-three, I would imagine.

Elliott: Much. But much more rewarding and exciting and unknown, and sometimes, it doesn't work. But when it works, it's worth it. It was nice to just see that that there was a whole other way. I was very worried. I was just terribly worried because I wasn't sure what kind of mother I'd be either.

Nathan: That's hard enough.

Elliott: Yes. I wasn't sure what kind of teacher I'd be. I hadn't taught for a while. But it was very interesting, and the students were very good.

Nathan: Were they?

Elliott: Yes. It was very good. I was very excited at the students that we had. It was a wonderful program. It was just terrible sadness that it was eliminated. Students that came had really interesting ideas and good minds, applied themselves and worked hard, and read. It was a good program.

Nathan: Yes.

Elliott: Of the teaching that I've done, it was the best teaching situation I have ever had. I think that was due to the people, Lea Miller, Ed Rossbach and Mary Dumas, who had set up the textile program.

Nathan: At this time, were you aware of other similar activities elsewhere in the Bay Area? I was thinking of fiber art, Fiberworks.

Elliott: That didn't start until much later.

Nathan: I see. Pacific Basin wasn't going?

Elliott: No, neither of them. They didn't really begin until the U.C. Design Department had ended.

Nathan: They weren't the same?

Elliott: No, not at all. Neither Pacific Basin nor Fiberworks were really schools to my way of thinking. They didn't have a library or a textile collection or contact with other disciplines besides textiles. I don't feel that's education. The people who started Pacific Basin, that started first, were people who had graduated from CCAC [California College of Arts and Crafts], who had been students of Trude Guermonprez. The people at Fiberworks were people who had graduated from Berkeley, from Cal.

Nathan: Right.

Elliott: There was some difference in the approach, but it was exciting because there was so much going on at that point. It was more in the nature of community centers which had classes and occasional speakers. They certainly didn't replace a liberal arts education at a university.

Weaving and the UC Design Department

Elliott: I think one of the things that was important about weaving and about the Design Department at that time, was that it was possible for women who--men as well--but women who had not had much faith in themselves to enter the art world by way of textiles. Many of them went on later to do other things, or went on to go into other areas of art. Somehow they found it possible to start in textiles, and they didn't find it possible to start in painting.

Nathan: That's interesting.

Elliott: Yes. I really believe that people should have the possibility of doing that. When I came here first, I thought I would like to study ceramics. I tried to get into the classes, to take classes with Peter Voulkos, and I couldn't do that because I already had a degree.

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Elliott: It seemed so sad to me to think that just because I had a degree--finally I had the possibility of doing classes full-time without having to do jobs--then I couldn't get into the classes. I felt the University was good in terms of people, the support kind of system, the fact that there were museums attached to Berkeley, there were good libraries. It was the kind of set-up that you would like to teach in. There were people who were prepared to work hard, to read, to think. Not all students were like that, but there were enough good students; it was not because of me, but because they finally had changed the major so that more people could begin earlier taking classes in an area they were interested in. So we had students who really came in order to take that, and who were around long enough so that they did wonderful work. That was just enormously exciting.

Sculpture, Masks and Humor

[Interview 2: February 28, 1989]##

Nathan: I was just looking at this clay piece. Is it clay?

Elliott: Yes. It's plasticene.

Nathan: Sculpture.

Elliott: The San Francisco Jewish Community Museum invited me, as part of a group show, to make a mask for Purim. I decided I would do one in the style of the old Fayoum portraits, the Egyptian heads. I think masks need to be kind of caricatures and often are humorous. I don't think that's my strong point in art at all.

I had an idea that I wanted to do Nancy Reagan as Vashti, the queen in the Purim story, because Vashti said "No," and she is now touted as one of the early feminists. So I thought I would make a fine portrait in the style of the old Egyptian, early Coptic style masks.

I began, and I discovered it was so wonderful to make sculpture again that I really couldn't bear to turn it into a caricature, and couldn't make it funny. So I changed my mind and did something very simple, and made Nancy as a totally different thing. I'll show you what that was like.

Nathan: I'd love to see that.

Elliott: [From background] It's not quite finished yet.

Nathan: I see. Yes. Now this is actually a color picture. I see the half-tone dots in this.

Elliott: Right, right. It's a color xerox enlargement from an old *Newsweek*.

Nathan: It says, "Just Say No" across her forehead. Nancy/Vashti is wearing a crown.

Elliott: This is just the fastening to fit. It goes around the head.

Nathan: You could actually wear this mask.

Elliott: Oh, yes. It's wearable. It's not wonderful. It's not beautiful. I realize I really have to remember that my artwork doesn't get humorous. It's hard for me to do something which is a caricature. I think a mask has to be an overstatement. In my

work, it's not appropriate. It just doesn't fit. So I don't do that. I have to remember not to even try to make something, a mask which is a light-hearted, very simple thing, as opposed to something that I care about deeply and put all of my feelings into.

I ran into that when as an undergraduate, I did puppetry in a class. My puppets would all be so beautiful, but they didn't work as puppets, or they didn't work from the audience to the stage. They were really trying for something very different. It's a whole other aspect that some people do and can do, and end up having something light-hearted and funny. I just don't think that that's what I do best, or am really interested in.

Nathan: Is it related to cartooning?

Elliott: Yes. As I said earlier, I'm no good at all at cartooning, and I'm not very interested in it either. I sometimes have literary ideas, like this "Just Say No." I think I have an idea that might be funny, but I'm not the person to put it into visual form. My stuff just doesn't lend itself to that.

The Question of Utility

Nathan: That's interesting, because you give the impression of having a lot of humor in your own personality. But in your work, it's something else?

Elliott: Right. That's right. Some people who do textiles do wearable art, and it's wonderful wearable art. But my things are not wearable.

Even if I start with the idea that it might be fun to make something wearable, I much prefer seeing the work without me; without thinking of who's going to wear it, or thinking of other things on it. I just want to see it by itself and not have the other be part of the concern, even though I enjoy other people's work that can do that.

And I think the same thing is true of all utility in my work. I really am not interested in what it might be used for. If I make a scarf, it's a rather ordinary, but personal, pleasant scarf. But, if I turn the scarf into a tapestry, it can become something of interest.

Nathan: Some one said to you, "Here is a basket with more space than element. What does your basket hold?" I think you said, "It holds space." Something like that.

Elliott: Air.

Nathan: Air. It was air.

Elliott: I think I also added something about what I hoped for the viewer's attention. I don't know if I did on that particular quote, but that's what I'm aiming at. I want you to be involved, to be caught, to be interested in it.

Nathan: So, now this plasticene work, is this a bust, the head and the neck?

Elliott: Sort of. It may not turn into anything, but I was so excited at doing it again, and I'd forgotten how wonderful that was.

Nathan: That's really delightful.

Elliott: Thank you.

Nathan: Such an interesting sort of broad-cheek-boned face.

Elliott: I may turn it into something more. I'm not sure. It's just quite wonderful for me to really remember. I used to take drawing classes every once in a while, or do drawing, not so much in classes, but really concentrate on drawing so that I was seeing very acutely.

I would feel every time I stopped seeing sharply, I would start drawing again so that I could train myself to see again. This was somehow seeing three dimensionally. I realized that maybe I needed to do sculpture for a while in order to feel volume in the way that I wanted to.

Viewer Participation

Nathan: Very interesting. There was one, netting, a picture of a netting piece that, seen three dimensionally, was very foamy, and very light.

Elliott: Oh, yes. That was "Surf."

Nathan: "Surf."

Elliott: Right. Five or six layers of net over one another. I was investigating what happened with that technique, and discovered that I was making sea foam. I did something I loved on that and never had done anything like that before, or since really, where I had the viewer participate by changing the position of the net.

It was five or six layers. They were not attached to one another, and they were shown on a pedestal lower than eye level. It was down closer to the ground. People could throw the nets down on top of one another, each net had its own sound, and the sound was wonderful. They could arrange the foam, or the surf in the way they wanted by just throwing it over itself and putting different nets on top and underneath. It was interesting, no matter what was on top, no matter how it was arranged, it looked good.

So I liked the idea. I liked some of the Japanese shrines that I've seen photographs of. I've not been to Japan, but some of them involve having many people pass by, and each person adds something.

I have always felt that I wanted something that I did to be finished. I wanted it to be arranged, and my statement would be there, and people could respond or not respond to it. But I was very taken by the idea that some of the shrines had nails in them; that many of the people that passed had added a nail or something to it as they went by.

The shrine had the weight of many, many, many people. It was the opposite, but like the shrines in Italy, where the feet have been worn away from many people kissing the statue. This was adding something to it, instead of wearing it down. That was something of interest to me.

Nathan: When you mentioned the netting, is that called knotless netting?

Elliott: There's knotless and there's knotted. That particular one was knotted. It's square netting.

Nathan: I see.

Elliott: It is like fisherman's netting.

Nathan: Yes.

Elliott: With knotless netting, it usually shifts around some, the spaces change. They don't stay square, or even rigid in any way. Knotted netting stays square.

Playing with Netting

Nathan: Are you still doing netting?

Elliott: Not right now, but this week I took out some prints based on my nets. This was one of them. This is done with an ammonia print, like blue print. It will darken eventually, but I did this series that were silkscreens based on photographs of nets that I had done. I used this net in many different forms. It's in that catalogue that I gave you today. These are photostats and silk screen prints in black and white.

Nathan: Oh, yes. Now this, let's see, this is what, three feet by two feet or so square? What would you say?

Elliott: This must be something like 24" by 36", or something like that.

Nathan: Yes. But the actual net is larger?

Elliott: It's five feet by seven feet.

Nathan: Oh, I see.

Elliott: Yes. And it's in color. I love the idea that you can take something which you've made and then play with it as though you're starting fresh again, seeing what happens when it's in black and white.

Nathan: You see it differently, too, don't you?

Elliott: Yes. Let me put this other thing away.

Nathan: Just as I look at it, it's so interesting because there are areas that seem very open, and then areas that are much denser. There's a lot of variety in this. Does this have a name?

Elliott: "Wall Net" was what I called it. There are four different varieties of it based on one net.

Nathan: It does look different in reduction.

Elliott: Yes. It's very different in the different sizes.

Nathan: It's very interesting to see what happens as you change sides and arrangement.

Elliott: Here. I'm trying to find four that are the same size so you can see: this is dark, and that's light.

Nathan: Yes.

Elliott: In that place. The net was photographed against a white background and against a black background. Then I also reversed them both in the printing.

Nathan: Yes, I see that you've reversed that.

Elliott: Here. Those two are on the black background, and these two are on the light, and yet they're all four different.

Nathan: Very much so.

Elliott: Anyway, I like the game of playing with what happens if you change something, if you change one aspect of it.

Nathan: That is interesting. We've seen painting or drawing that looks different when it's reduced, but I didn't know that was true of fiber work.

Elliott: It is very different when it's smaller.

Nathan: Yes. How long ago was this done?

Elliott: In '78.

Nathan: In 1972-76, when you were at the California College of Arts and Crafts, you had some netting shown at the Anneberg Gallery and also some miniature tapestries. Do you recall that?

Elliott: That was where I showed "Surf." That was the first time I had shown netting. I think that that was in '72? Something like that. I may have done the net for this in '76, or sometime between '76 and '78. This wasn't done yet. They were sort of the beginnings of different kinds of netting.

I remember when I first did netting, it was very different from anything I'd ever done before. I just got carried away working on netting, and didn't have any idea where it was going to lead me, or what I wanted to do with it. I remember I showed the netting to Katherine and Ed Rossbach, and said, "I don't know what I have here." They were very enthusiastic and encouraged me to exhibit whatever they were; not naming them or thinking that I had to go further with them.

Nathan: You were teaching at the same time as Ed Rossbach?

Elliott: Yes.

Nathan: So you had had a great deal of contact?

Elliott: Right. But as you know, he's a rather reserved person, and so it took quite a while to get to know him. Just given the situation of contact in Berkeley, I'm not sure I would have ever known him as well if I had not been teaching with him.

Teaching and Atmosphere at CCAC (1972-1976)

Nathan: Let's see. I think probably we're ready to move, if you are, to the California College of Arts and Crafts [1972-1976]. You were still teaching at summer session at Berkeley at that time?

Elliott: At Berkeley, yes. I taught at Berkeley in something like '76, when Ed Rossbach was on sabbatical; I taught one of those quarters.

Nathan: How was it to teach at Arts and Crafts? What were the interesting students doing?

Elliott: It was quite different from Berkeley. I thought that there were occasionally very special students, very talented and special students. But on the whole, the students didn't work quite as hard as the students I'd had at Berkeley.

At CCAC, they were the kids who all the way through school had been the talented kids, and they were accustomed to working much more on their own work without direction. They just didn't work quite as hard. They certainly didn't read as much, and they didn't go to see shows as much.

They were much more isolated and much more involved with each other and themselves, and not so much extending into other areas at all. That was too bad. Though there were a couple of students that I had there that were quite special, on the whole, I didn't think the level was as exciting for me, or at least the emphasis wasn't as exciting.

Nathan: Did you feel that they were interested in a life in art? That is, making their living in art?

Elliott: Well they didn't think it through in that way, but they had all assumed they would.

Nathan: I see.

Elliott: Right. A lot of students didn't come to classes. I don't know if their parents had been able to send them, and they came to the first class, or the first week. Then they just didn't come again, or not through most of the term, no matter what some of the instructors did. It was simply that they weren't quite as involved in classes themselves.

That may have been somewhat different if the instructors were working with the loom. But I was teaching off-loom classes and seminars, and often students simply didn't come. I had occasionally had students who weren't interested, or who didn't appear, or who had their own problems, but I felt at Arts and Crafts, there were many more students like that than I had had for a while.

It was interesting to be some place where there weren't all the academic prerequisites. On the other hand, because they were sort of proving themselves, the administration was stricter on things like the thesis than they had been at Berkeley. There was a reaction, I guess, to the idea of what an art school should be, and they made a lot of things stiffer than they had to be.

Nathan: Would the thesis be something that a student created?

Elliott: Oh, yes. Well, wrote.

Nathan: It was an actual thesis?

Elliott: A written thesis, yes. Yes. They were trying, I guess, to be academic. I don't know if anybody ever read the theses, but it was a requirement then.

Nathan: Was there much interest in designing for industry, for example, like what you did in Detroit?

Elliott: No. No, there wasn't very much interest in that at all.

Nathan: I see.

Elliott: It's just funny. Also the times have changed. There wasn't that much industry here.

Nathan: True.

Elliott: And so people couldn't relate to it as well. Actually, some of the people did eventually, I think, go to New York to do some designing for industry. But more people from Berkeley did that. There weren't that many, but the students that I know who did end up going to New York to design printed textiles, for instance, or

even design for industry in woven textiles, were from U.C. Berkeley and not from CCAC.

Nathan: I was thinking, I suppose, of Dorothy Wright Liebes and whether her influence would have been felt.

Elliott: Not at Arts and Crafts. People weren't aware of her. At Berkeley, they weren't aware of her then, until Ed Rossbach began writing about her.

Nathan: Were there any local artists who seemed to inspire the students?

Elliott: Not really. I think that was true more at Arts and Crafts. They were all concerned with themselves and what they wanted to work at.

Nathan: You told me that, but I can't quite seem to accept it. [laughs]

Elliott: They really weren't interested in what anybody else had ever done before. That is strange.

Making Netting Interesting

Nathan: That's an insight. When you were teaching there, then, was there any relationship between what you were teaching and what you yourself were doing as an artist?

Elliott: Well, I began working on the netting because I had been teaching off-loom classes which included netting, and I hadn't responded myself very much to netting I'd seen. I didn't seem to be able to get the kind of work from the students in that, that I'd gotten in other things.

So I began to net to see what I could do with it. When I got interested in it, I found that I got wonderful results from the students. After I had tried it in a number of ways and saw what I could do with it, I then was much more excited about it. I think the students were, too, and did better, more exciting work.

Nathan: It's an interesting observation.

Elliott: Yes. I had felt before that the work I'd seen in netting all seemed mechanical, and I was sure that--well, I wasn't sure, but I thought it might be possible to do something that wasn't like that. When I began to work in netting, I used it very differently from how I had seen it used before, and saw that in

fact you can use any technique, any material, and make it do something that you're interested in.

Controlling and Playing

Elliott: It doesn't have to be that you work with it in a way that other people had worked with it before. I feel that very strongly about all of the things that I've done. If you can make the material or the technique do what it is you want, then you have some control over it. Then you're using it for yourself.

It occurred to me that I wasn't interested in the grid. I was interested in things which were much more organic. I suddenly realized that with knotted netting, you basically had a square you were working with, and this square was repeated and repeated. What you were making was a square composed of squares.

Now, with what you see here, the square's completely distorted, because I have layered so many things over and over and over it. This isn't the way netting is usually done. I was doing it this way because I was playing with distorting that square. On some of them, I worked purely with the square to see what effect the square would have if I emphasized color and material. But when I got to this, I thought, "Okay. Let's just see if I layer and layer and layer over itself, the square stops being square."

Nathan: Yes, I see. You said a little earlier that if you know what it is you want to do, then you can do it. You're so much more free. But that's the trick, isn't it?

Elliott: Right. I didn't actually know what I wanted to do. I was playing with it to see what would happen. I think that's when something happens; when you can allow yourself to see what happens and work on the basis of what happens, accepting some things and not accepting others until you're able to get something that touches off some excitement inside you. Or, abandon that, and move on to something else.

I think it's when you start with a fixed image, then you're stuck, because nothing ever turns out the way you hope it will anyway. Or if it does, then you realize you weren't hoping for enough. You know, you might get what you tried for, but it's probably not what you want. You think that that's what you want, and you achieve it, then you see that it's not enough. It's almost never enough for me, so I keep going.

Nathan: You learned a lot about many things. Were there other techniques that intrigued you?

Elliott: Oh, they all intrigued me, and I haven't tried them all yet. Ed Rossbach was teaching the off-loom techniques as well, and we each got different results from our students in those classes.

That may have been why I thought it might be possible to do something more with netting, because one of the students in his class did something that I thought was interesting and exciting to me, though it wasn't what I wanted to do.

So I then did a series of nets, and I think Ed then was re-excited by netting after what I did. He then did some very pure, simple nets just in white string that were very beautiful and very simple. I think that's what's exciting, is somehow playing back and forth on one another on what each of us was getting.

Nathan: That's beautiful.

Elliott: Yes.

Nathan: Is this netting at all related to some of the Peruvian netting?

Elliott: They did do this kind of netting, but then, the ancient Peruvians did everything in textiles. When I did this, I was trying to see what would happen if I attached nets onto themselves, like a patchwork quilt; I've not done anything else like this, and I've never seen any related netting.

When I first began, I planned to do filet lace on top of the netting. So I began to do these nets that were going to be the background, and I got so excited by the nets that I couldn't put anything on top of them. With filet lace, you're embroidering into the net. I just couldn't stand the idea that I would be putting anything into or on top of the net.

Fibers, Natural or Man-Made

Nathan: Do you tend to use mostly natural fibers?

Elliott: Not necessarily. Right now, it seems that I'm using natural fibers, but it's not philosophically determined. It just happens that there's some bark available that's beautiful, or that somebody sent me some from Hawaii, or that the caning shop is selling some now. I've not had that as a material before.

I really like the idea of mixing the two. I think that's when it gets exciting. Then you're aware of the natural and the synthetic or man-made, causing a kind of tension between them that I think is exciting. I'm interested in using all synthetics, I just don't happen to have any at the moment that are of great interest to me.

I'm always so interested that Ed uses man-made materials, or easily available materials.

Nathan: Like newspaper?

Elliott: Like newspaper. I don't work with those materials; maybe I should say I haven't used them yet. But I like what he does with them. I like the idea of it very much. At the moment the materials themselves don't seem to matter much to me as any kind of statement.

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Nathan: I think it was Ed Rossbach who said that there is the feeling that your materials could spring back to their original position. That you don't fool around.

Elliott: I like that.

Nathan: I do too.

Elliott: Yes, it's nice. It's very nice. It implies life inside this.

Nathan: Doesn't it? Energy in here.

The Weight of Commissions

Elliott: Well, you know I wanted to go back just for a minute on something, when I was talking about how I got stuck on the mask. I think not only that I shouldn't even try to use something like humor in my work, but also it's like doing a commission, which I feel is really imprisoning for me. I know I wouldn't even accept a commission unless it gave me some leeway and all, and yet there's this heaviness, the weight of an obligation that a committee will judge the work, that I find offensive.

I have done one major commission that's at the Bureau of Social Services in San Francisco. It's a large tapestry that's fourteen feet across by four feet high. I did that about ten

years ago. I was pleased with the way it turned out, but it was so worrisome in the process.

I couldn't stand the idea that I would have somebody coming and looking at it. The architect wanted to come and see it in progress, and I refused because I really felt that no one could see what I was doing, while it was on the loom, anyway. It was a horizontal loom, so it was rolled up.

I really don't like the idea that I would be doing something on order. I'm not doing yardage. I'm not doing something which is repeatable, or which anybody knows. I don't think anybody else can really tell what something's going to be like until it's finished.

I find it very difficult to think about commissions. It's not an appropriate way of working for me. I may be doing several commissions next year, because the commissions are somewhat interesting, and because I'm looking for work, but I don't think that's an ideal way to go for me. I would much rather do work, and then if somebody wanted to buy it, have them buy it, though you can't always do that because of size. It's difficult to work on a huge piece and not know what you're going to do with it when you're finished. So, sometimes doing a commission means that somebody pays you for the materials and the time, and you're able to explore some things. But I don't really like working that way.

Nathan: How is it for you to submit entries for a jury, or for a competition of some sort? You've won a number of awards.

Elliott: That's fine, if I feel good about the work. Then I think I'm submitting the best work that I can do. Somebody else can see whether or not they think it's also good. I don't like submitting something that I'm not completely happy with, and I wouldn't normally do that.

Problem Solving

Elliott: I keep thinking of this mask. I wanted it to be light-hearted, and I think it's basically a literary idea, and not a visual one. It was kind of problem solving. But when I was in Lausanne in 1985, I was aware that many, many of the entries [in the Lausanne Biennal] were problem solving. The problem was how to do something which didn't take all of your time for two years, and that you could afford to ship.

I don't think I want to really have that be my major concern in my textiles. I really want to be thinking about, "What do I want to make that visually intrigues me most, no matter how time consuming, and no matter how expensive it is to make?" I don't want to think about those extraneous problems.

Of course, you always think about those problems somewhat. There's no way to avoid them entirely. But I feel that the emphasis should not be on that part of it. It should be, "What do I really want to do most with whatever time I have?" rather than, "What can I afford to take a chance on in case they don't accept it, and can I afford to send it?"

It's just another approach. The Japanese artists at Lausanne were particularly good at the problem solving. They worked primarily with things that were basically shipping materials. The objects themselves were made up of shipping materials.

Nathan: Yes. That relates to that interesting book?

Elliott: *Textiles as Sculpture*. That was the theme of the Lausanne Biennal I took part in.

Nathan: Right. It was the one about craft and/or art?

Elliott: No. That was another show in Japan. A lot of the entries in that show were constructed in a similar way. I think it is part of the Japanese thinking about large objects. It's sort of how to make something lightweight, shippable, cheap; but that's almost a mathematical problem, and not a visual one to me.

V EXPERIENCES IN TEACHING AND EXPERIMENTING

Nathan: I don't know whether this interests you particularly, looking at the list of places that you have taught. Is this an important element of your work?

Elliott: I taught at all of those places mostly because there wasn't a full-time job available in the places I wanted to teach. I really enjoyed working at Berkeley, and I would have enjoyed continuing to teach there. At CCAC, there wasn't a wide enough range of classes or guaranteed number of classes I could have each term. And at Davis [University of California, Davis] the commute was quite impossible for me when I had young children. So, that was really why I took the job in Ann Arbor in the summers, because I could earn a salary and also be able to visit my family. They still live in Michigan.

Variations in Emphasis

Nathan: Let's see. And then there were Pacific Basin, JFK University, Western Design Institute.

Elliott: Each of them had a different emphasis. At the Western Design Institute, the students were studying interior design. The course in textiles was a required class for them so that they would know something about textiles and how to use them.

Most of them had not studied art very much at all. I was teaching textiles for interior use. I learned a lot about fireproofing and about how materials behaved in industrial and residential settings. It was interesting to me to teach it. Plus, I had to give them whatever background I thought they needed to have to be able to use textiles in designing.

Beginning in 1983, I taught at JFK [John F. Kennedy University, Orinda]. I taught several tutorials if there were students that I thought made sense for me to work with.

Artist in Residence, Pacific Basin (1979-1981)

Elliot: Ellen Jouret, the manager at Pacific Basin, asked if I would like to be artist in residence there in 1979-1980. The grant was renewed 1980-1981. I was interested in seeing how that felt; what would happen.

Nathan: What does artist in residence mean?

Elliot: It means that it was a grant through the California Arts Council to spend twenty hours on site, not teaching. It wasn't supposed to be replacing regular teaching staff, or a way of paying for teachers. It was for me to be able to do artwork in that place. It would mean on the site, to have people see what was involved and the problems of choices and working.

They built me a vertical loom. They wanted to know what they could provide that I didn't have at home, so I was interested in trying that. I found it very wearing to be some place public, trying to work for 20 hours, but I think it was very worthwhile.

Obviously, I'm a very private person. I don't seem it, I think, but in terms of my work I'm rather private. I have a hard time working with people around. Very hard time, with anybody around. So that working on site was not an easy thing for me. I wasn't teaching actual classes, but I was responding to people a good deal of the time.

Nathan: Would people come in and watch and question?

Elliot: Right, right. A lot. Part of the time, I was giving some talks explaining the problems involved in doing work. Some part of it was interesting, because I was interested in working on crêpe. I don't know if you read the articles on collapse at all?

Nathan: Yes. Let me mark that down, because we could talk about that as soon as you're ready.

Elliot: I thought I would just a little now.

Nathan: Good.

Experimenting with Crêpe

Elliott: As part of my artist in residency appointment, I decided that it would really make sense for me to do something in which I could use the crowds of people there who were interested in the projects I was working on. So I did several projects. One was to do work of my own.

Another was to organize people who wanted to learn about crêpe, and have them each work on one aspect of it. Some of them worked with chemicals. Some of them put on warps and wove to my specifications. They made enough for themselves and for me, so that I would have a sample of what each variation looked like.

They were then able to try a lot of things that I hadn't had a chance to try. I could see what would happen if they did one of the things that I had set up. They tried different kinds of threading and different kinds of material. So they had the benefit of my interests. They chose things which interested them, and I had the benefit of having many more hands than I normally have.

Nathan: Yes.

Elliott: I really don't like the idea of other people working on my tapestries, for instance. So I tried to figure out things that I could do that would make some sense in a public place. One of them was doing some textile printing. One was weaving crêpe, and one was doing some graphics. So I worked on a series of different things for this two-year period.

The Japanese Competition

Nathan: You did win an award in a Japanese competition. Was that a collapse, or...

Elliott: Yes. Right, right. It was. I'd been working on crêpe experiments for a very long time, but there's no production weaving here. Obviously, I'm not in New York enough of the time, and I'm not interested in trying to weave yardage myself, or hiring people to do that. I thought originally I would see about selling some designs, but I'm too far away from where any of that is happening. I also am not very much interested in the business aspect of it, so I didn't turn that into anything much. So I

ended up finally teaching a lot about it instead of trying to market it.

But it was fun to submit it to a competition, because I knew that this was good stuff. It works as clothing material. I'll show you some of it, because it's quite wonderful as clothing material. It hasn't been used much in the fashion industry until recently. It was nice to submit it to an international competition and win an award because I knew that it was really unusual and special cloth.

Spin and Resilience

Elliott: It's very, very basic. It really is the interaction between the particular materials you're working with and the spin of the yarn. It can't be any more simple and basic than that.

Nathan: Is this related to some studies of Near Eastern fabrics with the collapse idea, one that has been used in other cultures?

Elliott: Oh, yes. It's been used. I think crêpe's been woven everywhere. There are a lot of different kinds of crêpe, and some of it is done chemically, and some of it is done after the cloth is woven, and some of it is done using different materials. Some of it is different pattern threading, and some of it is the amount of spin.

That's really the part of it that I was interested in. The amount of spin. And I used the simplest weave possible with it, so that I just eliminated everything else, and just worked with the spin.

Nathan: I see.

Elliott: I will show you some of these, because there's something wonderful about the feel. It's really the feel of the cloth. You get that more with this than with any other kind of fabric I know. It isn't just that it's a luxurious feel. It's very special. The cloth itself jumps back. You have a resiliency which is very exciting to me.

Nathan: Interestingly enough, in the photograph, if we're thinking of the same thing....

Elliott: That photograph, though, didn't reproduce well. The cloth has much more character than that shows.

Nathan: But even the picture gave a lot of that quality.

Elliott: Oh, good. Because that material really does jump. It looked washed-out in that photo in the Japanese Fashion Foundation Catalogue.

Nathan: I'm glad to have you explain that.

Elliott: You know, also in that catalogue, I submitted a photo in which I was here, and I had thousands of things around me. I think even a cat. Everything was around me. It was very cluttered. I liked that idea, that there's all this stuff. They of course, cropped everything out except my face. It was a tiny little photograph, and that wasn't the message at all.

The Attraction of Photography

Nathan: Well, this leads naturally to the Textile Study Center at the DeYoung Museum where you were instructing with respect to photographing textiles [1985-87-88].

Elliott: Right. I did that with Pat Hickman. That was kind of interesting. One of the good things about Pacific Basin was that though their approach to woven textiles was very much more traditional than mine is, they were very open to new ideas for classes. Both Pat and I had many ideas for new and different classes. We taught some of them together.

We both had studied photography, but with very different instructors. We are quite different ourselves, so we photograph as differently from one another as is possible. I use fast film, Pat uses the slowest she can find. She always uses a tripod, and I much prefer to not use a tripod. Our photos are very different from one another.

When I first took photography, I took it with Jean McMann Stein at Berkeley one summer when she was teaching there, and I was teaching a textile class. I just took that one class, and I took it reluctantly. I didn't really want to study photography. I do enough work in different areas in art, and I didn't want a whole new area. But I had a conversation with Ed Rossbach in which he talked about photography, and I began thinking about it. I thought, "I need to learn how. I really don't want to, but I probably should."

I took the class, and I discovered that in fact, I loved it. I just loved it. I didn't like photographing my own work,

but I loved photographing. I thought, "Gee, if I had started this twenty years ago, I would have become a photographer," because I just loved doing it.

Nathan: What was there about it that appealed to you?

Elliott: Well, I liked the mystery of it, and I like black and white photographs. I just found it very exciting. It was really design. It was black and white design. It was just like everything else I love.

My first photograph was of the side of my house with one of my kids' discarded lunchboxes and leaves over it. The photograph ends up looking like a brocade, like a Chinese brocade. You can't even tell what you're looking at. That's what I like. Yes. It's just wonderful. I love that quality. I like the directness of it, as opposed to all the other things that I've done where there was all the preparation, and all the afterwork, and yet there's mystery.

With photography, I really only like printing my own work. I'm much less interested if it's printed by somebody else. I wouldn't ever print other people's work. Part of my thinking was that I didn't want to burn or dodge when printing my negatives.

You know, I didn't want to manipulate negatives in the darkroom. I wanted the negative to be like, oh, I can't remember the man's name who photographed in China, Cartier-Bresson I think, who loved the idea of having negatives that he could take to a drug store and they would still turn out well. All the work was done when the photograph was taken, and not when it was printed. Later, I did darkroom printing using many negatives layered together. I found that process fascinating, but it seemed more related to printmaking using many plates than to printing a single planned negative.

I hate Ansel Adams's photographs. I can't stand the schmaltzy quality of the heavily contrived print. It's almost perfumed for me. It's just too "artful." There's such a self-consciousness about it, about the heavy shadows and light. The photos feel manipulative to me. I want my photographs to just be clear. I'll show you photographs.

Nathan: Clear communication?

Elliott: Well, I'm not even sure who I'm communicating with, but a clear statement somehow, without the heavy overtones of obviously trying to evoke a response. I mean, that feels too self-conscious, even though it's done carefully and well.

I don't understand how photographers can have other people print their work, or how a weaver can have other people working for her. Painters generally don't. The printmakers today have a lot of their things printed by others. The whole thing fits together for me so that I can't stand the idea of somebody else doing any part of it for me.

Nathan: You want to do the entire sequence?

Elliott: Yes. The dreary stuff, I suppose, the phone calls, or the bills or the letter writing or something, I suppose I'd be willing to have somebody else do that, but I really don't want somebody else working on my art work.

Once I had an apprentice briefly in the summer who worked on a tapestry of mine. It was really an experiment to see how many threads per inch I needed for a large woven tapestry that I did. So I did a small one in order to find out. Not all of it, but just to see whether I was getting the detail I wanted.

I never was very attached to that piece, because somebody else wove it, not me. She didn't weave most of it. She just wove a little part of it, but that was still disturbing to me. So I feel that way about most of it. I don't understand how you can have other people do part of it for you.

Nathan: Interesting. Are there particular problems in photographing fiber art?

Elliott: There are. I think I'm not so interested in photographing fiber art as I am photographing. It was like drawing for me, and I would just go photograph anything. I loved double exposures. I had a student, Caroline Beard, who was very excited about double exposures in photography. She was at UC Berkeley. In her textiles she did layers and layers of bobbin lace over one another. They were very beautiful.

Her photographs were multiple images, four and five images over one another in black and white. They were very unrelated images, but they were very beautiful when she printed them. That's more complicated than I want in my work, but those excited me.

She'd be making sure where her darks were and her lights were, and she would build up an image. I'm interested in photographing something in which it is your eye that makes the thing work, rather than what you were photographing. I'm really still not interested in photographing my own work, except that sometimes it's the only way to get the aspects emphasized that you want.

Pat Hickman photographs most of our collaborative work now. I have in the last year or two had someone else photograph most of my own work just because I found I really didn't have enough time to do all the parts. I couldn't do the photography as well as the work. But I must say, even though the photographer, Scott McCue, is a good photographer--and I tell him what emphasis I want in the work--I still prefer my own photographs of the work, because I want something emphasized in them that he doesn't feel in the same way that I do.

Pat, in our collaborative work, emphasizes those things that excite her. We both discovered that our work changed, that our photographs changed as a result of working together. I guess mine got sharper, because she emphasizes that, and hers began, finally, to have volume, because that's really the message that I have. She was getting beautiful, elegant transparency, but the things looked flat. And I would say, "I worked so hard to make this basket full, and you're not catching that."

Nathan: Yes. There's a photograph of you and Pat Hickman. I think the photographer is Jeremy.

Elliott: That's my son.

Nathan: It is. It was a rather real portrait.

Elliott: We both are very awkward having our photographs taken. Neither of us feels comfortable with it. It's funny because Pat will photograph me, and I will photograph her for various things, but we're both uncomfortable. It's very funny--photographers have trouble with me. If they catch me, then I'm in this awkward, sort of midway position, or I'm moving. I'm just always moving. I never was conscious that I moved that much, but photographers seem to have a hard time with me.

Pat photographs with the slowest film she can get, so when she photographs me, it's impossible. I photograph her with fast film, and she doesn't move. So it's this crazy contradiction; Jeremy was pleased to have something included in a Japanese catalogue. He puts it on his résumé. And he's not bad at it.

Nathan: No. I found that really a very dignified portrait.

Elliott: Good. Oh, he'll be pleased. Thank you. Well, we were pleased with it. We are never pleased with photographs of us, together or individually. We just don't do well at it.

Nathan: That's very interesting. Well for some people, the personality doesn't easily come across. It's hard to capture an image.

Writing as a Simple, Strong Statement

Nathan: We had been talking about your teaching, and I was thinking of your writing as teaching, and then communication. You do write in an interesting way.

Elliott: Well, thank you. I don't really think of myself at all as a writer. I really feel that I have some things I need to say, and so they seem much more translated from the spoken language. As an adult I have never particularly wanted to write. I wrote as a child; I wrote poetry and all. But I hadn't thought of doing any writing in recent years, except that when I was asked to do the introduction for *The Basketmaker's Art*, I thought, "You know, I've never done anything long. I'm not ready, and the deadline is soon," and all of that. Then I thought, "Nobody's ever going to ask me again. I'll never have another chance to say what I think."

Nathan: Exactly.

Elliott: "And so I can change my mind later." I had told you I once was very uncomfortable about being tape recorded, and I've now decided it's okay. I can change my mind. So I say that today, and in a year, if I've changed my mind, then I've changed my mind. So I went ahead, and I was basically pleased to have had a chance to think it through. I don't feel that visual art can be translated into words. I'm not interested particularly in describing things in that way, or even writing beautiful prose. I don't want to be self-conscious about it. I don't want to try to make it beautiful. I just want to be very clear, and interesting, hopefully.

You know, I want it to be a simple statement, and I want it to be a strong statement. I think when I've written things like book reviews, the editors always think they need to tone it down. It's fine to have a very strong statement. As long as my name is signed to it, they don't need to take credit for it, or blame. I think it shouldn't be like radio announcers who have to have a particular accent or non-accent in order to be acceptable for national radio.

I ought to be able to say something and have it be harsh, even I don't think I am harsh particularly, but I ought to be allowed to do that. On the things that I've written, the editor will write and say, "We've changed the tone a bit. We hope you don't mind. Basically, we've kept what you thought to say, but

we changed the tone." I think that that's silly. Why ask me to do it, then?

I would like to be able to say it the way that I want. I think one of the things that's wrong with craft magazines particularly today, is that there's nothing that's critical, and I certainly don't mean on a personal level. I mean in terms of ideas. Nobody wants to say anything that's critical. They somehow feel that that's not their role. I think that that's a sad loss for the rest of us.

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Nathan: You were speaking of book reviews that have a point of view and evaluation that may or may not be favorable. You did a book review that struck me, a very recent book. Is it Jack Lenor Larsen and Freudenthal?

Elliott: Yes, that's right.

Nathan: I have a note about it. You had some very pleasant things to say. Then you said, as I recall, something to the effect that the pictures didn't key into the text; there was no index; and there were a few things like that. I thought, "Here is a researcher." This was just, and I was impressed that you were perfectly clear about that.

Elliott: I also think that he should have been clear. Jack Larsen should have been clear on what his co-author had done in the book. That was never made clear at all. It would have made me feel more comfortable to know who had written the book, or what parts people had taken in it.

Nathan: He is so well established and much admired, he probably would be able to handle such questions.

Elliott: I would hope so.

Nathan: Did you have any reverberations?

Elliott: No. I also wrote a review on Peter Collingwood's book some years ago on cardweaving. That I thought was an extraordinary book, and praised it highly, but I never got any response. I find one of the things that's hard in writing the few things that I have done is that you never hear anything before or after or during. You don't have any idea if anybody's ever read it. I find that very hard. I would like to be able to have some discussion of what I've written. People don't have to agree with me. It's fine. I like the idea that there could be people coming to

something from different points of view. I would have liked some response. It would have been nice.

Need for Informed Criticism

Elliott: Anyway, I feel one of the things we need terribly in textiles is some kind of critical looking at the field. It's the thing that I think would help the most, not even only on the book reviews, but on the work that's being done.

Nathan: Occasionally I have seen something in *Artweek*. Are you familiar with the sorts of show reviews that are published there?

Elliott: Yes, and some of them are okay. Often the people who do the reviews are art historians who aren't grounded at all in textiles. They feel that art history--that is the history of painting and sculpture--equips them to be critics. They may write well, but I don't think that they necessarily know enough about other areas besides painting and sculpture.

I think people who write reviews on printmaking would be expected to know the difference between intaglio and relief processes. They would have to know the difference between an etching and a silkscreen, and know who had been doing which and why, what was involved, and how the work relates to other art. I don't think the critics who write reviews on art using traditional craft materials like clay, wood, and textiles have any training or any knowledge or any awareness of what the artists might be trying for. That's one of the things that's very sad to me.

Nathan: Would you like to do more of this?

Elliott: No. I think it's hard work and it's not where my primary interest is. I think it's possible that I could do it, but there's an awful lot of heartache in doing it. I feel that I would not be doing what I'm best at, which is doing the artwork. I think my husband would do a good job at it. I wish he would do it, because he writes easily, and he has a very broad acceptance of very many approaches. He can accept a wide, wide range of things. I think that's very exciting, and that would make him a good critic: being able to write well, having a keen mind, and having a wide acceptance, and also some respect and awareness of different ways things are done.

I've tried to encourage him to do that, because I think he could do well, and he is also more secure as a person in terms of

personality than I am. I think he would not be as hurt as I might be.

Nathan: Certainly, he must have learned a great deal being with you and seeing the things you see and do.

Elliott: I think so. Also, he took several classes in weaving, and he's done some ceramics, and he's done some woodwork. It's not even so much what he has done, as his awareness of it. So I think he'd be perfect. I'm working on it.

Nathan: Great. Really. Oh, yes, I did have this, the book we spoke about, of Larsen and Freudenheim. It was *Interlacing: the Elemental Fabric*.

Elliott: Right.

Nathan: All the time that you were teaching and doing other things, you were clearly doing your own work as a creative person. I don't know whether you'd care to go back. It's a long time ago now between '61 and '66. Was that when you were getting established in the West here?

Elliott: Right. As I mentioned, I looked for work and when I couldn't find anything, I decided what I needed to do was to do my own work. For the first time in my life, I didn't have a job, and I was able to work. [Answering machine comes on in the background]

Nathan: Should I turn this off for a minute? [Referring to tape recorder]

Elliott: Please. [Tape stops, then resumes] The problem with all of the many, many jobs, teaching at the different places or doing workshops, is they're scheduled far in advance, and it's very much like when I was working at Lincoln-Mercury. You're working three years ahead of time, and nothing has much reality. So that if I'm thinking today about a workshop I'm going to teach in a year and a half, it's very hard for me to think of what I will be interested in doing in a year and a half, and which supplies I want to have. Then if I'm also teaching currently, even part-time, it's a very distorted sense of reality.

Anyway, between '60 and '66, I was just working very, very hard at home.

From Between the Cracks to the Tiffany Grant (1964-1965)

Nathan: You were entering competitions?

Elliott: As I said before, my work didn't really fit in the categories then, because I was doing embroideries and appliqués. Even when I got a loom, my textiles didn't fit into the categories. All woven textiles were supposed to be three yards long. There were particular requirements, and I was between the cracks. Then in '64, I submitted work to several shows and won awards. I mentioned them before: Richmond, the Oakland Museum, and a show in Seattle, where I won the Purchase Award and three honorable mentions. Then things did turn around.

Nathan: Right. I thought how gutsy that was to sit here and work and then finally get in. The Tiffany Grant in 1964-1965. What did that permit you to do?

Elliott: That just took the edge off of everything. It meant that I could buy materials and not be so worried. I don't know if my husband had started teaching yet or if he was still working as a statistician, but it just made things much easier. It was also sort of a vote of confidence in what I was doing, because I didn't know anyone here, and there was no one to show any work to.

You know there's this fear that after all of the years of planning to do work, maybe you really don't have anything to say, and facing yourself and saying, "Okay, well, let's see." What happens is, in fact--I don't know if it's geometric--what happens is if you have an idea, and you don't have time to work, you tend to pick those things that you know you're going to get some results from. So you tend to make smaller things and safer things.

If you're not teaching or doing other work at the time and you can do work, then each idea becomes another ten ideas, and becomes another ten ideas. You then have a wider choice from which to pick what it is you want to work on. You obviously can't do all of the things that you have in mind, but you can do many more of them. It's not even that you do more, it's that you dare to do things that might not work, or that are open-ended, totally open-ended, and you don't know if anything will come out of it.

Nathan: I think of Louis Comfort Tiffany. Is that the Tiffany?

Elliott: That's right.

Nathan: So it was from the East?

Elliott: Yes. Yes. It was one grant. Every couple of years they gave a grant in sculpture and in painting and in ceramics and in weaving, and they were given on alternate years. Mine was in '64 and it was in weaving.

Nathan: It was in weaving? Tapestry, or a different mode?

Elliott: Well, no. What I submitted for it was "Tribal Cloth," a large cardweaving, that I was very excited about.

Nathan: Oh, yes. That had taken two years to do?

Elliott: Yes, right. It was that and two other pieces. You were supposed to send three pieces. At that time, nobody was using slides yet, so we sent the work itself.

Nathan: Oh. So it was gone.

Elliott: Yes, but it came back; you know, it was for them to jury.

Nathan: That must have been wonderful.

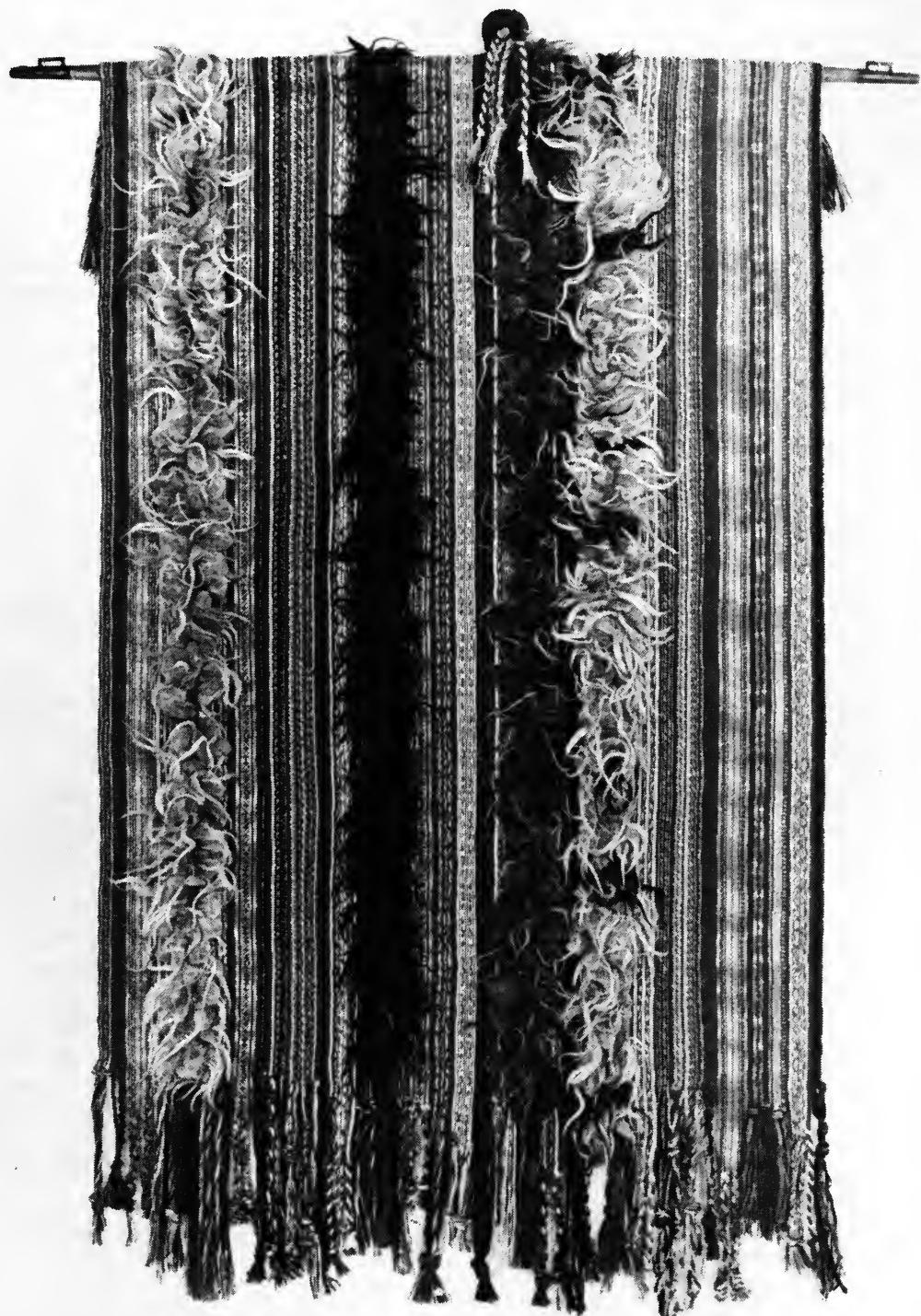
Elliott: It was wonderful. It was especially nice because the mail came-- I love mail--and I opened this envelope and a check for a thousand dollars fell out. At that point, a thousand dollars was a great deal of money to me.

Nathan: Oh, of course. [Cat walks delicately on the table] I should have a pot of ink, so I could have a little printing going on here with paw prints.

Fabric Collage Show at the American Craft Museum (1964)

Nathan: I'm sure there are others you'd like to talk about; there was a competitive exhibition, fabric collage show at the American Craft Museum in 1964.

Elliott: Right. That was one of the first national shows that I was in, and it was about four people, four of us, who were working with fabric collage. I was pleased to be in that show. It was an exciting show. Part of it was traditional, and then four of us who weren't. I didn't know any of the other people, but Paul Smith, who was the director of the museum, came out and looked at the work. It was very nice to be selected for it. It was an interesting show.



"Tribal Cloth" (cardwoven wall hanging)
Collection of Robert Cranford
Lillian Elliott, 1965
10'Hx6'W
wool, mohair, fleece

Photograph by Stone and Steccati

Nathan: Yes. Was this what Paul Smith spoke about?

Elliott: Oh, yes. On "Craft Today," and "Poetry of the Physical." Those were two major national, invitational exhibits that traveled widely.

Nathan: Right. I wondered about his role in the judging and promotion of fiber art. He was director of a museum?

Elliott: He was Director of the American Craft Museum for many years. In the beginning it was called Museum of Contemporary Crafts. He's now emeritus. I don't really know what his role was in the promotion of fiber art. He always responded well to my work, and I was pleased with that. But New York is a long way off, and the West Coast was sort of going in its own circles.

Regional Approaches to Fiber Art

Elliott: I think in terms of fiber. Probably it's, well, it's for a lot of different reasons, but I think the Rossbachs have played a strong role in why so much fiber art has developed on the West Coast. There was also, I think, UC Berkeley, and having a good design program at a university, so that it became a real center here. This was where much of the experimental stuff was going on.

Nathan: Were you particularly interested in the work of Trude Guermonprez?

Elliott: I was interested in her work. I taught with her at Arts and Crafts. Her work didn't move me, most of the time. The things she did the last couple of years, I found more exciting and more personal. I was interested in her as a person.

I think hers was a Bauhaus approach.

Nathan: Do you characterize your approach?

Elliott: I don't.

Nathan: It has been suggested that the imminence of the Far East may have influenced developments here to some extent.

Elliott: I think that's true. That's true in ceramics certainly. I think part of it was the people who moved out here, being as far away from the Midwest and East Coast as one could be and not be in the

ocean. I think the Far East had a strong effect. Japanese textiles particularly have had a strong influence on textiles here.

I think that much of what goes on in New York and in the South today, in terms of the mills, is the approach toward making commercial cloth, and isn't the experimental approach toward textiles that happens out here. I'm not sure what it is in art altogether on the West Coast, but something with an open end is clearer here.

Interest in Graphic Design

Nathan: Yes. Is that part of your philosophy? The open-endedness of what you do?

I did want to ask about your interest in book design, fliers, and any graphic design. How did this get started?

Elliott: Well, I majored in commercial art in high school, and I thought that that was what I would be doing--graphic design. I was very happy when I was at Pacific Basin and I suddenly thought, "Okay. This year I'll work on graphics again." It was fun to get back to that.

I really liked doing that. I used to do posters. I feel very personal about the graphic arts that I do, just as I do about the photography.

Miniature Tapestries

Nathan: Yes. It does fit with the other things that you have developed. There is the question of the miniature tapestries. You said a little earlier that there is a time when you're inclined to do smaller things, and possibly, time-limited, or safer things. Was that how you entered work on tapestries?

Elliott: I think I did the miniature tapestries when my kids were young, and I just wasn't sure I would live long enough to finish a large tapestry. I just couldn't imagine that I would have that kind of time. With a miniature tapestry, I could finish it in a week or two weeks. I knew that I could finish it. There was something very nice about knowing that.

Nathan: Was there a market for these?

Elliot: Yes, and I sold them. It was a big surprise to me. I didn't do them knowing that; I just thought it would be nice to be able to finish something. When I was pregnant with my first child, since I had no idea what it would be like to have children, I got a loom all prepared and a design ready. I decided I would weave it, use it as a cartoon for a tapestry.

I got my loom all threaded and ready, and then Jeremy was born. I resented bitterly having something all planned and all decided for me even if I had prepared it. What I really wanted was to be doing something new. I never had worked with a cartoon before. I'd always had a small sketch and changed it as I wove. It usually turned out very much like the sketch, but with the cartoon I felt very limited.

It was hard to work with the cartoon, and I began doing other things off the loom. Then when I was pregnant with my second child, Aaron, born May 20, 1968, that cartoon was still there, and I finally finished the tapestry. I just couldn't stand it any more, because I thought, "I will not have this child and still have this piece on the loom cluttering up the loom so that I can't make something new and different with it."

But then it was somehow after that that I thought, "Okay. I will do something that won't take two and a half years." That piece had been on the loom all that time, not because I'd been working on it, but because I hadn't been working on it.

Nathan: Yes, yes, I see.

Well, I might just mention a few things. We'll see if any of them appeals to you particularly.

Elliot: Sure.

Ceremonial Textiles

Nathan: Tapestry. You mentioned appliquéd and embroidered wall hangings, printed fabrics, and Jewish ceremonial textiles in '79. Was that branching in a particular direction?

Elliot: Well, I had worked in all of those directions since 1960. I made Jewish ceremonial textiles as a way to celebrate holidays, especially Passover every year, since it's a holiday I love very much. It's a holiday that celebrates freedom and the Song of

Songs is read in the synagogue. I thought, "If I were designing a holiday, this is what I would design." So I made a textile every year for Passover, as my way of celebrating it. It would become a holiday, if I just put up all these cloths around the room. It made the house feel very festive. I have a very large extended family and when I was young we would all get together to celebrate holidays. I may have been a little nostalgic about that when I first began to make the Jewish ceremonial textiles.

I began doing those textiles and then from time to time, I would sell one. I hadn't done them to sell, but, you know, somehow somebody would be interested, and I would sell it. Then I would be very sad at not having it. So each year, I would try to make a new one.

Nathan: Were these mostly...

Elliott: Appliqués.

Nathan: Those big, dark Hebrew letters?

Elliott: Letters. Yes. I did do a woven tapestry of Song of Songs, of a section of Song of Songs, and I did some printed ones. Then I had a show at the Magnes Museum of the ceremonial textiles. I had decided to do a Torah curtain, because instead of the heavy velvet ones of my childhood, I thought it would nice to do something that was very light and fresh and springlike. I did something that was partly silkscreen, partly appliquéd, with light, instead of the heaviness.

I exhibited a few of them in various places. Then, when I had the show at Magnes, I thought it would be nice to make very simple things that were not complicated, that didn't take thousands of hours, so that they would be accessible to people, so people could enjoy them and imagine how it would feel to have them in their homes.

I feel now that maybe religion and tradition are like masks for me, that they make me more aware of the audience than I want to be. Also, it's hard to do new work in an area where there is a strong tradition. I don't think I do my most experimental work in that direction, even though I was interested in doing it, and I love Hebrew letters for calligraphy. I love that. The power of the strength of black and white. I love that notion, but I'm not sure that I am as free and fresh with that work. It's like a commission, and I feel that there's a hampering quality about it that I don't think helps my work be its best.

I'm still interested in the idea of it, but I don't think that that's my best work.

Seeing Differently

Nathan: What is your best work? Where do you feel the best?

Elliott: I'm not sure. I think the design quality, dark and light in whatever it is that I do, the strength of that, is exciting to me. I also love the colors and textures of yarn in weaving. The intensity of color and the incredible subtle variations seem possible only in textiles. I like playing with those colors. I don't think I'm a sculptor, but it's a direction that interests me. I think that's an area that I could have gone into. I feel I have a sense of volume and form that helps me make good baskets.

Now, that's only developed over years. When I was a potter, I think my form was not strong or interesting particularly. I did a lot of surface design on it, but I wasn't seeing the form, shapes and forms themselves as something strong. I'm interested that I feel now that I am wearing new glasses; I'm not actually, but I see very differently, and I now see three dimensionally, whereas when I was studying ceramics, I was not really aware of form.

Nathan: Interesting.

Elliott: And I like the fact that that has developed over time. It's like learning a whole new alphabet. I can't stand the idea of cluttering something up now with surface design on the pots or the baskets that I make. If I did ceramics today, I would not be doing the heavy decoration on it that I did then. I would be concentrating on the form, the shape, and the volume.

Nathan: Were you at all interested in Peter Voulkos?

Elliott: Oh, sure I was interested. As I said earlier, when I first came out here, I thought I would like to study with him, and tried unsuccessfully to do so. I am, of course, very interested in his work. I feel that I have developed a feeling for form on my own by working.

Nathan: When you speak of the three-dimensional work, are you thinking of the basket?

Elliott: Yes. Right now. Well, I don't think that it has to be that. I think it could be sculpture. I don't think it has to be in one area particularly.

The Power of the Basket "Goya"

Nathan: When you did the basket, "Goya," did that express that blackness against a bright light?

Elliott: Right. That was like calligraphy for me. I love that basket. That was really in response to a question that came up in class.

##

Elliott: My student wanted to know about an anti-war statement. She had tried to make something in weaving, and she said, "Is it possible to make a strong statement in textiles?" Because when I did this weaving, I thought it was a wildly strong anti-war statement; someone came through and said, 'Oh, isn't that pretty.'"

I then gave that as a project in a class, whether somebody could make a strong statement. Not necessarily anti-war, but whatever statement that it be strong, not sweet and domestic and nice. For myself, I started to make a basket to see if I could make a three-dimensional form that makes a strong statement. I did it, it became so powerful that it almost was frightening to me.

Nathan: I'm so interested that you said that. I didn't see "Goya" in person, so to speak, but I've seen pictures of it and I find it frightening.

Elliott: Yes. It reminded me in the way I felt about it, of the horrors of war, the "Goya" series. That's why I called it "Goya." I thought, "My God, it is possible. One can make a strong statement." With that, I didn't quite know what I was doing. It was one of my early baskets. I was putting it together in many different ways and was having trouble making it stand, and yet I think the feeling I got was a really powerful one.

Nathan: Were these elements wood?

Elliott: They were all different kinds of materials, some were reeds, some wood, different kinds of materials that I put together.

Nathan: Did you paint them black? They weren't black before?

Elliott: No, they weren't. The reason I painted them black was to unify them.



"Goya" (basket)
Lillian Elliott, 1979
36"Hx24"Wx26"D

Nathan: I see.

Elliott: Then I discovered it was like a calligraphic statement against a white wall.

Nathan: In fact, I thought, "You couldn't live with that."

Elliott: No. No. When I had it at home, I just couldn't have it in the room.

Nathan: Where is it now?

Elliott: I'm not sure if it's at my studio or not. I do own it. I couldn't sell that one, somehow. It seemed it was one that I felt was very important, almost as marking a stage in my work.

Nathan: Yes. That certainly proved your case. Were your students able to make strong statements?

Elliott: Some. But it didn't even matter what they did that term, but that they were aware of the possibility of, that they could, in fact, do that. Not from seeing mine, I don't even think I brought mine in, but that it was a worthwhile thing to even know that you had all this power at your fingertips.

One term several people made a flag. It was a term when one of the projects was to make something using a symbol that was not only an individual symbol. People would color the flag in different colors that they wove. It wasn't only flags. One young man used his car as a symbol for himself, and he wove it in several parts. He hung it unevenly so that it was almost as though it had been in an accident. It was just the possibility of thinking of whatever material you were using in textiles, that you could, in fact, arrange it. You could think about it in a way so that you had a wider language to work with, so that you could say things that maybe had not been said in textiles before.

I feel that people in painting now don't only use stretched canvas on frames. They can extend painting into a number of different directions, and I think the same thing is true of textiles. You can use cloth in a lot of different ways, and use it for the message that it has. It's a soft material the way Claes Oldenberg uses it, but it has a strong message.

Nathan: Right.

Elliott: I think you can then use the combination of the fact that it has a domestic footnote, and that that reference adds to its power, instead of detracting from it.

Nathan: There's a certain irony?

Elliott: Yes. Right. Absolutely.

Armature and Dialog

Nathan: Are we speaking of your baskets as being exercises in volume among other things? Basketry doesn't have to have an armature the way sculpture does?

Elliott: No. No. I don't really like the idea of an armature. It's like when I first began weaving, I wove tapestries because I wanted the image to be part of the structure, and not have any supporting structure underneath. I felt that my embroidery always started with a cloth, even though it was non-traditional embroidery.

There had to be something else there; the appliqués were putting together a lot of different parts and making it into a whole. I thought that I wanted to weave a textile, a tapestry in which the whole piece was woven together as one. I wanted to take many ideas and weave them as one cloth, instead of putting together parts.

I'm sorry, I got waylaid. What was the question?

Nathan: Let's see. I think we were talking about background. You don't want an armature. The armature is the piece itself.

Elliott: Oh, yes. Right, right. That was the way I thought about tapestry.

Nathan: Yes. That there's no background in the piece.

Elliott: That's right. That seems dishonest to me. I want the armature to be the piece. When I wove tapestries, and when I do weave tapestries, I like the warp and weft to both show, as though it's a dialog, and not one using the other.

Nathan: Oh, I see. A dialog.

Elliott: Yes, of the two parts involved. If there's an armature on something, I'll want that armature to show as part of the piece. I don't like the idea that underneath there would be something holding it up.

I'm always wondering, "What's holding it up?" I always wonder when I see films, "Where was the person who was taking that picture?" I think, "Wow. That's a wonderful photograph of the bird, but where was the photographer?" I feel that about the armature. What in the world is holding it up? The thing looks soft and lovely, but how can it stand there?

One of the things about baskets that seems exciting to me in non-traditional baskets is that the whole piece is made together; that you have the possibility of making a structure that's three-dimensional that's expressive, that uses materials in a new way, and that supports itself.

Baskets Related to the Human Scale

Elliott: There's also something nice about the fact that it's somewhat intimate. That is, the basket somehow in its nature has a limited size, most baskets. That size is related to a human being that we gauge the size by. We say it's a giant basket if it's bigger than a person.

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Elliott: You think of baskets as being roughly a quarter the size of a human being, a third the size of a human being, or maybe a half the size of a human being. If you make a really giant basket, it sort of stops being a basket, in fact. It becomes a form, even though it's an open form.

A boat, like the birch bark canoe thing, is made pretty much like a basket, but it's no longer a basket when it's bigger than a person.

Nathan: Yes, now there was a basket of yours, was it the one at the Lausanne Biennal that was a boat? Somebody called it a boat.

Elliott: Right, right. They did, because, I think, it was bigger than a person.

Nathan: I see. What did you make it out of?

Elliott: It was basically the same materials I make the baskets out of today. It was furniture rattan. That is, it was five-eighths inch oval rattan. So it was larger material than I had been working with for structure before.

When we, Pat Hickman and I, made the proposal for it, it just seemed as though it might be fun to see what would happen if we expanded the size to something that would fit the size requirements of the Lausanne Biennal and would still be a basket. So, instead of doing a model, we sent a photograph of one of our earlier baskets thinking if it got in, then we would make a basket roughly based on that. It became much more complex when it got bigger.

Nathan: Does the size make complexity?

Elliott: Well, in order to support itself, it somehow had to have a number of layers. I was very comfortable with that idea. It was all tied together, just like the other baskets. It was basically using the same materials, and Pat covered it with sausage casing.

Nathan: There was no bark on it?

Elliott: No. Actually, it was supposed to have hickory bark around it. We ordered it, but it didn't come. That winter it was so cold that they couldn't harvest the bark in time. It has to be above 25 degrees or something in order for them to gather hickory. So it never got shipped to us.

Nathan: I didn't know that.

Elliott: We didn't either.

Nathan: I thought of bark in connection with it.

Elliott: We had actually ordered bark and thought that it would mean that.

Nathan: How large was that structure?

Elliott: I don't know. It started out so that it filled Pat's dining room. It went to the ceiling, and it went to the walls. By the time it was finished, it was less than that. It was about six feet high or something. Maybe six by eight or something.

Nathan: Was that the biggest thing that you had ever done?

Elliott: Yes. Right.

Nathan: Talk about volume in the form.

Elliott: The form was not wonderful, but that didn't matter very much. It was really seeing what would happen, what could happen. The most exciting thing was that those separate, the 12 separate panels (when we cut it up for shipping) were very beautiful as wall bas-reliefs. That was the big surprise for us. We didn't know it

would happen, and that's really what was beautiful. That was worthwhile, that was really interesting. We would like to do more with that, the idea of bas-reliefs, actually. Because those were very, very nice. Somehow that hasn't happened since, but we thought we would try to do some like it.

Nathan: What has happened to the actual structure itself?

Elliott: It's part of a collection in Switzerland. I've forgotten the name of it.

Nathan: The city of Lausanne, or whatever it is?

Elliott: No, no. It was a private collection. We were happy to not have to ship it back home.

Nathan: Did you wonder whether the sausage casing would hold?

Elliott: No, we knew it would, because Pat had used it a lot before, and there were numbers of layers. It was very strong, the structure itself. It was like building furniture.

Nathan: That's extraordinary; when you go in for volume, you're not fooling around.

Ann Blinks and Overspin

Nathan: Earlier we had been speaking of the collapse technique; was it connected with Near Eastern fabrics?

Elliott: That wasn't the way it started for me. Ann Blinks, who is a weaver friend of mine in Carmel...

Nathan: Oh, is she the one for whom you wrote an article for the book?

Elliott: That's right. The festschrift was for her. When she was eighty, ten of us wrote articles and put them together into a festschrift. She had shown me samples of something she had woven in which she discovered that the yarn crimped back on itself and made these bubbly cloths, but very small scale. She got interested and did something that replicated a Peruvian loin cloth. It was almost elastic, because there was so much spin in the yarn.

They were nice. She thought it only happened with hand-spun yarn, and I thought if it happened with hand-spun it would happen with commercial yarn, too. So I began to try it with

commercial yarn. She had told thousands of people about this and had shown it to many weavers, and nobody had ever been very interested. It touched something off for me, and I became very interested. I have now been working on it, I realize, about eighteen years now, which is a big surprise to me.

Nathan: There was the term, "overspin?"

Elliott: Right. It's more spin than you need in order to make a strong yarn for cloth.

Nathan: I see. Now can you take a spun thread, and increase the spin?

Elliott: Yes, you can add spin to it. Yes. It's like when you have a yarn that kinks on itself, there's so much spin it doesn't know where to go. If you weave that extra spin into a cloth, then the whole cloth bubbles.

Nathan: Interesting.

Elliott: I'll show you some samples later.

Nathan: Good.

With respect to basketry, you had spoken about what a basket should hold. It should hold the attention of the viewer and air. I remember that. It was in connection with "Romany," that was the name of the Lausanne Biennal piece.

Elliott: Yes. We later weren't delighted with the name. The piece did what it was we were trying to do, but it was one of those cases where after you've done it, you realize what you were trying for wasn't enough.

In individual panels, we liked it very much, so that's really the way we wanted it seen. I think we called it "Romany" because we were pressed for time and couldn't think of a name at that moment. But also, it's a gypsy name, and the idea of a voyage.

Nathan: Yes, yes. It seemed rather evocative. I guess I wasn't quite clear about the panels. Are these the panels from which it is constructed?

Elliott: That's right. Yes. It's not an armature. It's the basket itself divided into twelve. We had planned right from the beginning to make it as one, and then cut it up and reassemble it in Lausanne, because we needed to ship it. So we cut it into, I guess, eleven, no twelve pieces altogether, including the floor part. Then I tied it together there in Lausanne.

Nathan: Well, maybe we have come to a good pause. If this is good for you?

Elliott: Yes. This is fine. I think I'd like to show you a couple of things.

Nathan: Yes, I would love to see them.



Pat Hickman (left) and Lillian Elliott, 1990

Photograph by Kenneth R. Kollodge

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name PATRICIA L. HICKMAN

Date of birth FEB. 23, 1941 Birthplace FT. MORGAN, CO.

Father's full name LYNN W. SAYLOR

Occupation BUTCHER, CO-OWNER OF
GROCERY STORE Birthplace BLADEN, NEBR.

Mother's full name FRANCES TANNER SAYLOR

Occupation GRADE SCHOOL TEACHER Birthplace GOODRICH, CO.

Your spouse DIVORCED

Your children MADELIA A. HICKMAN ; HILARY L. HICKMAN
(TWINS)

Where did you grow up? FT. MORGAN, CO.

Present community HONOLULU, HI

Education B.A. UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO, BOULDER, CO, 1962

M.A. UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY, CA 1977
MAJOR - DESIGN / TEXTILES

Occupation(s) PROFESSOR - UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII, ART DEPT.

Areas of expertise TEXTILE HISTORY, ETHNIC COSTUME, STUDIO NON LOOM,
AND LOOM WOVEN TECHNIQUES; RESEARCH ON TEXTILES + COSTUME
OF TURKEY AND GUT + FISHSKIN OF ALASKA, AND CONTEMPORARY BASKET
SUE FAY
DESIGN

Other interests or activities TRAVEL, PHOTOGRAPHY, HIKING. MOST
IMPORTANT IS STUDIO TIME FOR MY OWN ARTWORK.

Organizations in which you are active HAWAII CRAFTSMAN. PRIOR TO MOVING TO
HAWAII IN 1990, I WAS VERY ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN PROGRAMMING
FOR THE DEYOUNG MUSEUM'S TEXTILE ARTS COUNCIL.

VI COLLABORATION AND INDIVIDUAL WORK: LILLIAN ELLIOTT AND PAT HICKMAN

[Interview 3: March 14, 1989]##

Advice from Joanne Brandford

Nathan: I wondered how it was, Pat Hickman, that you decided you would take a class from Lillian Elliott at the California College of Arts and Crafts. How did it all start?

Hickman: I moved to Berkeley from Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1972. In the early '70's on the East Coast, I was studying with Joanne Brandford, who had been a student of Lillian's and of Ed Rossbach's. As I was feeling sad about leaving the Boston area weaver's network that I was beginning to feel a part of, she said, "You have better things coming. Write to this friend of mine, Lillian Elliott, and just see if you could study with her."

I did that. Lillian at that point wasn't certain where she'd be teaching, but it was left that I would get in touch with her as soon as I arrived in the fall of '72, which I did, and at that point learned that she was going to be offering a non-loom course at CCAC. I registered and was very pleased to begin a friendship and colleague acquaintance.

Elliott: Actually, Joanne was a colleague of mine, so I never think of her as a student. I taught her weaving the summer before she left, because, though she had studied weaving before, she somehow had always felt uneasy with it. I think she hadn't done it for years. She came and said, "I really want to be able to weave, and I don't know how."

I think she took the classes years before, but as it hadn't worked for me when I first learned, it hadn't worked for her. She wanted to be able to feel comfortable with it. So, in a way, she was a student of mine, but she was basically a friend teaching at Cal when I was teaching there.

Hickman: I guess I hadn't totally understood that.

Taking Time to Think in a Visual Way

Nathan: How did you then move from student and teacher to equal colleagues in your ventures?

Elliott: Pat was an unusual student. She was the only person who ever came at 8:30 or 8:00. I think my class was from eight to whatever. Nobody really wanted to show up until nine. I said that anybody who wanted extra help or wanted to talk about work should come in earlier, and Pat consistently came in earlier.

Hickman: I was a special student at California College of Arts and Crafts for one year, and then with Lillian's encouragement, applied to do graduate work at UC Berkeley, which I did then for four years. During that time, I was very aware that the department at Cal, the Design Department, was reduced to primarily Ed Rossbach being the one who focused on textiles.

There were certainly other people whom I studied with, but I by then knew what was available through Lillian's teaching, whether it be at the Berkeley Adult Education Center or elsewhere.

I decided that for me, it made sense to supplement what was happening at Cal by having whatever influences really made a difference in my work, have them go on simultaneously, under whatever roof I could get them. So I did continue to take classes with Lillian, and with Ed Rossbach, for sure, for four years.

I stretched out my graduate time, getting a Master's at Cal, partly because I had changed directions. My undergraduate work had been in English Literature, and Ed Rossbach was willing to take a risk and admit people into the graduate program who had not had undergraduate training in art. I was very grateful. I felt I needed time, however, to make up for years of not thinking in a visual way. So I really benefitted from that extra time. I think I continued to feel that Lillian was very much my teacher. We would meet maybe once a week for lunch.

Elliott: That was actually a couple of years later.

Hickman: We weren't doing that when I was at Cal?

Elliott: No, we weren't doing it, but I was teaching at Cal from time to time.

Hickman: One summer I studied with you there.

Elliott: And one quarter I taught when Rossbach was on sabbatical.

Hickman: Yes. I don't remember that I took a course with you then. I may have been away. I don't know.

Elliott: I don't know if you were there or not, but I just felt that our paths were crossing.

Hickman: A lot. Yes.

Elliott: Or whether I was actually in the role of teacher, not whether or not I was just somehow around. I was teaching each summer, and I was teaching that one quarter. Somehow I was there, so that I think we had quite close contact. It was when you were all finished that I think you suggested, or I don't remember, but we would meet for lunch. First we met for lunch once a week. Then we met for lunch at one or the other's house, and we worked on our individual work, using that day as studio work time.

Volume and Coverage

Hickman: At one point, Lillian may already have described this, I don't know, but we were working at her house. I had started working with gut, with hog-casings in 1977, after I graduated from UC Berkeley. I had done nothing with that before. I was working on my own individual work using that material, and Lillian was doing three-dimensional work. We were sitting over lunch, just simply batting ideas back and forth, and I think I maybe verbalized that I would be interested in working in a three-dimensional way, that most of my work had been two-dimensional: wall pieces, fairly small pieces.

Nathan: Beautiful colored lace?

Hickman: Yes. That was in gut. For myself I was thinking it would be interesting to try to begin to understand volume in a better way. Lillian was working on a form which she said she was thinking of trying to cover with some sort of material, maybe paper. It wasn't specific. I said, "I think the material I'm working with might be able to do that." It was very much a spontaneous thing, feeling that this would be one time, you know, just to see if my material would stick to the branches. That was that.

Nathan: Those wild branches.

Hickman: I did that. We decided it would be worth trying it together. That was really the moment when I think the collaboration started; never with the intention that it would continue, or that we would go on doing it. I think one piece then led to an idea for something more. It happened that it was 1981 and that became the time we had our first show of collaborative work. Consistently since then, sometimes much more intensively than other times, we have continued to work collaboratively.

Seeing Light in a Gut Parka, and Teaching Textile History

Nathan: Was it your studies of Inuit art that got you interested in this material?

Hickman: Right. I had been asked by Ed Rossbach in 1977 to teach a textile history course at Cal. He was on sabbatical leave, and I had just graduated, and came back from having lived in Turkey for a year where I was doing my thesis research. I went to an exhibit at the downtown center of the DeYoung; it was called "The Cover Story" which was curated by Ann Wilson. In that show, there was one gut parka which really spoke to me. I was very moved by the quality of light that seemed to just be inside it. I really was astounded by the beauty of it, the esthetics of it.

When Rossbach asked me if I would teach, it was to be a term focusing on textiles of Europe and the Americas. As I was putting together a course outline, I thought, "Well, let this be an opportunity to explore my understanding more of these particular garments and that material."

So, I spent a lot of time at the Lowie Museum, looking at their collection, and photographed it, and did as much reading as I could. You know, that was to be one lecture in this ten week term. I think we were on the quarter system at that point. As I was preparing for that course, I realized my hands didn't understand how this material felt, or how people in fact really could stretch it and do what needed to be done with it. So, again, never thinking I would work with it, I went to a delicatessen in Oakland and bought sausage casings and began to experiment. It was, again, kind of a freak accident that I was excited by it and kept feeling there was more to learn, and so really started working with it in my work.

It was a happy accident that Rossbach had asked me to teach the textile history, and that led to beginning to do research at that point which has continued over the years. I guess it culminated at one point in my guest curating a show at the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, of historic traditional materials of gut and fish skin and contemporary art work.

Nathan: I see. Before we proceed, I wonder if whether both of your having a background in English Literature had any connection with your understanding each other.

Elliott: I don't have a background in English Literature. I had a minor in English. I don't think it had much.

Hickman: I don't think I even knew you had a minor in English.

Elliott: I took a lot of literature classes in college.

Hickman: I don't think we've ever talked about it. No.

Elliott: Harriet read my résumé. I don't think you've ever looked at my résumé.

Hickman: Not that part, I'm sure.

Gut on Baskets

Nathan: So let's carry on with this use of that material. You were thinking of enclosing your basketry structures? What did you think you might do?

Elliott: I was thinking of cloth, or various other structures, non-loom structures over it, or paper, or papier maché. I tried. I did a little of it. I was thinking I might use the bandages that are plaster impregnated. And I still hope to do all of these things. I started with the paper. Maybe it was the particular things I was working with, but I didn't like the way it adhered to my branches. So I stopped doing that one and thought, well I would try a different paper and different glue another time.

When Pat suggested that her material, the one she was working with, would work, I thought that for the friendship, I was willing to do it. I really didn't particularly like the gut in its raw stage. I don't like the odor, I don't like the consistency, and it's not a material I would ever work with. So I was somewhat reluctant, but I thought it would be interesting to see what it was like, what it looked like. I think that the

animal part of it was too strong for me, and I really didn't want to do that. I just thought it was a concession for a going relationship. It was worth doing to try it.

Then I was very interested visually in the effect. I don't think that anything else gets the quality of tautness and of general tension between the two elements, anything that I've seen, that gut does on the baskets. So I've been willing to pursue it, to continue having Pat cover the baskets.

Nathan: Is there any man-made substance that can do what gut can do?

Hickman: Well, there's a synthetic casing which is straight and is sold dry. I think it's quite boring by comparison with the natural casings, and I haven't worked with it. I just have a strong preference for the rawness and the quality of life that the gut has. But that would visually be related. I just haven't personally chosen to work with it.

Elliott: Actually, before Pat was working with gut, I had had two students who had used it very differently, very, very differently.

Hickman: The synthetic?

Elliott: The synthetic. I had been interested in the synthetic, because that seemed a possibility to me. I had seen a necklace made of it, and I'd seen it used in a quite large piece earlier, and I thought that I might...actually, I investigated how I would order it. I just never pursued it. It was one of those many things that you think you might like to try. I just didn't do it. Then when we began collaborating, I felt that the quality of the gut was achieved with baskets when Pat covered them with the gut casing.

The Path of Collaboration and Creativity

Nathan: The element of creativity is always of interest with artists, and I wonder if you would like to comment on how this collaboration has or has not stimulated your creativity.

Elliott: It's an irritating process to me. I think I'm interested in it because I'm very excited about my individual work again. It does bother me.

I like one part of it. I love the fact that where there is so much competition in the art field, we have managed to work together. I don't think the competition happens in our work, and

we still enjoy qualities of the other person after all of these years. It seems very nice to me. I do think we get something. We still get something that's very different from what anybody else does, and from what I'm able to do alone.

Hickman: I think the process of collaboration is confusing to the outside world. I know I am irritated sometimes by responses to it, because art making is so often such an individual artist's process. The idea that two people can even figure out how to work on a single piece raises lots of questions.

Sometimes, we feel that, or I feel that people are almost more interested in the collaboration, or more interested in the gut as a material, than perhaps in seeing what the work is as a result. Sometimes it feels as if part of what we need to do or have to do is educate people about how this works. It's annoying when people confuse individual work with collaborative work, because in our minds, these are very separate, and we can explain. Perhaps it's like night and day. I mean, there's no way in which we can confuse who did what of individual work and collaborative work. I think that's one of the hard things about it.

I think it is a very intense working relationship. There are times when I think there's been a real challenge to be sensitive to each other's rhythms and moods and all kinds of things. I feel, in the long run, it's been an amazing process of growth and change in the work. I have certainly learned from this experience an enormous amount, and feel that it has also spilled into my individual work. It feeds what I do or want to try for individually.

I also think that one of the strengths of it is that our egos are not so involved with the creative object that is a result, and that we can stand back and look critically, and say, "This doesn't work," without it feeling like a personal threat or criticism. I think that's been an exciting way of working.

Sometimes that same kind of distance from the collaborative work, I think, makes it more possible to stand back and look at individual work; my own individual work or perhaps my looking at Lillian's individual work. We can have a dialog about that, which I don't think would be quite the same if we hadn't worked together.

Elliott: I don't think I feel nearly as possessive, nearly as attached to the collaborative work. It puts an emphasis on the process itself, or what we're trying for in quite a different way than what happens in my own work.

What I think used to happen in pottery was that you would see couples that would exhibit together. Then eventually, they would begin exhibiting separately, and then they would get divorced. This happened with all of the couples. It was very funny to me to see.

It's interesting to see how that works. Most of the time, it's not an ongoing thing. Now Peter and Ritzi Jacobi who collaborated for many years have begun working independently, and I think really choose to not do any more collaboration now. They try not to state it definitively. They say that they might for a particular thing, or if they had a commission. It's clear that that's not where their direction or interest really is any more.

Gradual Change Over Time

Nathan: During the process of working together, is there a pattern of change in the work itself or in the way you approach a problem that has occurred during the collaborative years?

Elliott: I think we've grown much more sensitive to one another, more than almost anything else. And the work has changed. We can look at something occasionally when we do it and say, "Gosh, that looks as though we did it five years ago. It looks like the work we were doing then." Most of the time, we can see an actual gradual change over time, which I think is good.

Learning from "Romany"

Nathan: Could you say what the changes are? Is it something that can be described?

Elliott: Well, sometimes we've discovered that over time that we liked a particular material, maybe. When we did the large piece for Lausanne, I worked with heavier materials, and we both were very excited about what that did to the end result.

Nathan: That was "Romany?"

Elliott: That's right. And so we then...

Hickman: You had to work with heavier materials just to structurally make this large piece stand.

Elliott: I feel that that's a little related to my weaving tapestries, where I would put enough warp onto the loom to make two extra tapestries after I did the piece I had planned to do. I think each time that we do something like that, a major thing, there's something left over that's free, that isn't part of the original plan. I think that what happened on the large piece was that we learned that it was very exciting to see a really heavy structure underneath. So for a long time, we began doing work that used that heavier material, and it changed the way the pieces looked.

Hickman: For me, I think when we first started, I was placing strips of gut in a pretty hesitant, very cautious way, just to see if they would adhere. I didn't even know that they would stick. I wasn't yet layering one layer on top of another and getting a very, very tough skin. It was much more a fragile look that I think the gut had.

Again, the large piece for Lausanne meant that I had huge areas to cover, much bigger spaces to cover with gut than I had ever covered before. I had to figure out how that was possible with rather small units of gut, and ended up feeling that I could put in a strip of intestine that was not slit, it was just whole as it came, washed and cleaned. I could use that as a scaffold, and attach it to one branch some distance from another, and cover this large area, and then begin to build out from it as a scaffold.

Those lines would then dry and become absolutely bonded with the many other layers of gut. What it meant, then, was that the structure that Lillian created could become simpler and purer and really minimal, as opposed to a more complex structure where I would have lots of places to attach the skin. It could be pared down to a real minimum, and I'd still have big openings, but I learned a new way of working through that business. The risk of working much larger, I think, did very much affect what happened with smaller work that came afterwards.

Nathan: All the time you were collaborating, do I understand that you also each did your own work at the same time?

Hickman: Right.

Nathan: So one didn't swallow up the other?

Hickman: No, but I think that's been a constant desire on each of our parts, that these three separate things be equal and simultaneous. I think there have been times when my own individual work has not had as much time to develop as I would like. I think more recently, I feel that I'm giving it more time and attention than I have been doing on the collaborative work.

Lillian certainly has been doing the same thing. So that just right now, I think the individual work is sort of moving forward, and the collaborative work is slower. We're just not devoting quite as much time to it as we were earlier.

Structure and Skin

Nathan: As you look around to see what other people are doing, do you find that others seem to be trying something similar?

Elliott: No.

Nathan: Well, I guess I was also thinking of Kay Sekimachi.

Elliott: Yes. Kay, it's true. She said she began after seeing our baskets...

Hickman: After seeing the "Almost Roman Glass" show...

Elliott: I'm not sure which show. I think in general, her notion was that she saw what we had done, and she felt that she needed to do something that took less time. I don't think we feel that baskets take less time, but I think she felt that she wanted something that took less time than her other work, and that she would try to make a three-dimensional form, somewhat related to what we were doing.

So in a way, she collaborates with her husband [Bob Stocksdale]. She uses his bowls as the form, and I think in a way, it's basically the same thing. It's one person providing structure, or form, and the other person providing the skin, as it is in the way that we work.

Hickman: I think there are several people around who play with this idea of structure and skin. Certainly there are historic references of baskets that are wonderful examples of this way of working and thinking. Ed Rossbach has certainly explored this idea in his plaited newspaper baskets that he's been covering with various papers.

Elliott: I misunderstood. I thought that you meant anybody who's doing collaborative work.

Hickman: Yes. I think the question could be taken either way.

Nathan: I didn't really specify, so certainly do it the way you like.

Elliott: Right. I just have to get used to it.

Hickman: There are other people whose work, sculptural work, is very much along similar lines. I think, Nance O'Banion, with her bamboo pieces and paper pieces, is working with a similar idea. I don't think there's anyone who's trying to duplicate or imitate our work by choice of materials or forms or anything like that. I'm not aware of it.

Elliott: Sometimes our students do, certainly without any conscious awareness. Nance was a student of mine.

Nathan: Oh, was she?

Elliott: Yes. I think it's true of our students in the summertime, in the workshops where there isn't always enough time for them to develop their own directions. Sometimes in basketry workshops, we're not sure whether they're going to continue working in very much that way or not. But so far, I've not seen them continue in that way.

Hickman: And most of them don't.

Elliott: Yes.

Search for Artists Who Work with Membrane

Hickman: One of the things that I wanted to try to do in guest curating the exhibit of "Innerskins, Outerskins, Gut and Fishskin" for the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum in 1987, was to try to bring together the work of artists who were working with this membrane, transparent membrane of either gut or fishskin.

I felt that it was a handful of people, many of whom had, I think, read an article that I wrote in 1981 in *Fiberarts Magazine* about gut work and my experience with it. I had had correspondence and telephone conversations with a handful of people around the country. But I really didn't have a sense of how many other people there were. The contemporary part of this show was a juried show. In the end, something like 40 to 50 pieces were selected of contemporary artists from all over the country. It wasn't just in the Bay Area.

And again, it was a kind of survey of what, in that moment of time, was happening. I felt I wanted it to seem as if artists' work had come together and there could be a sharing of

ideas of how people worked; not an attempt to hold onto secrets of how this was. I felt it was an open exchange, and I wanted that to happen as part of what came about in the show.

I don't think in the results there that there were people who were working in the same way that we work. I don't know. Do you have any memory of that yet?

Nathan: I wondered whether any people you would expect to deal with these materials included any Native Americans. Any Athabascan Indians? Any people to whom these materials would be very familiar, whether they seemed to be doing any of this work that one would call art?

Elliott: I'm not familiar with any. I know that they do use skins, and make some gut baskets, but I just don't think I've ever seen any that are really related.

Nathan: A few garments, of course. But I was thinking of the art.

Hickman: Yes. I don't think I'm aware of it, and I really made a huge effort when I was doing the research for that exhibit; advertising for entries through the Institute of Alaskan Native Artists. I was in touch with many artists.

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Nathan: You were just saying that that sort of low thud and squeak that we hear is a loom next door?

Hickman: It's a loom. Yes. One of the weavers next door is weaving away.

Nathan: I see.

Elliott: There are several artists' studios in this building. Next door there are four or five weavers who share a studio.

Nathan: That's interesting. You were just saying a word about looking for Native artists.

Hickman: Yes. I advertised in a news journal, the I.A.N.A. (Institute of Alaskan Native Artists) for Native artists to submit contemporary work for this juried part of the exhibit. That institution also has a kind of archive of all of the work that contemporary artists are doing, and I tried as much as possible to double check and make sure that I followed every lead that I got.

To my knowledge, the people who submitted from Alaska, and there were some, were non-Native peoples who had lived in Alaska for some time and who had certainly, I think, been influenced by

the native functional garments and objects that they knew. At this point, I'm not aware of any Native Yup'ik Eskimo peoples or Athabascan peoples who are exploring in a direction of non-functional pieces.

Experience of Photography

Nathan: I did want to ask you, if I may, a quick question about your interest in photography as it relates to your work.

Elliott: Well, actually Pat in recent years has been doing all the photography of our joint work. We both began photography as a result of, I think, Ed Rossbach who suggested to Pat when she was a student, that it was a necessary class.

He suggested it to me as a colleague, just asked whether or not I had been interested in photography, and I said, "Oh, I just don't want one more area of interest." I thought there were so many I already was concerned with. He thought it was rather important. As I mentioned earlier, I thought about it and one summer, when I was at Berkeley, I took a class and became to my great surprise, terribly interested and very excited by it.

Then, together, Pat and I took a second class, a darkroom class. We both had very different teachers the first term. I think that's probably appropriate. Then, when we worked together, we didn't work on the same photographs.

Our photographs are very different from one another's. It was a class where we worked with darkroom procedures. I think we both learned a lot. We were very excited about what was possible.

Hickman: We shared a small darkroom space.

Elliott: A closet.

Hickman: It was probably a test of working together in a short time period that was unlike anything either one of us had done up to that point. Again, that was before we were doing any collaborative work together.

Elliott: I think you lose all your secrets when you work in such close quarters with another person. You learn what happens when somebody knocks.

Nathan: Looking around the studio, I remember, I think, Ed Rossbach saying that the lack of contrast in certain fiber artwork makes it difficult to photograph, so that it shows well. Have you been able to overcome that? Is that a problem?

Elliott: I don't think it's a problem, because in the baskets I'm primarily interested in form, though I had originally thought the point of my doing work collaboratively with Pat was so that I would have a surface to paint on. I found that I liked the form itself so much that I didn't want anything to touch it. I didn't want any decoration on it. So it doesn't seem to me to be a problem.

Hickman: Though you have done some of that with the collaborative work.

Elliott: Oh, yes, but what I mean is, it's not a problem to photograph.

Hickman: No. No.

Elliott: I think that it's sort of a challenge in order to get things in focus properly, especially if they're large, or if they're black (my own work). But I think on our collaborative work, the form itself seems particularly photogenic.

As I said, Pat recently has been the one who's done all of the photography.

Hickman: I really like the quality of gut that allows light to pass through it. That's just something that I continue to be interested in. So when I'm photographing even an all-white basket, one of the things I want to get the feel of, is the fact that there is light able to pass through this membrane, even though it's been painted with the white acrylic. I enjoy getting that in a photograph.

When Lillian and I each photograph the same piece, it's clear that I'm looking more at what's happening with the gut, and I think she's looking more at what's happening with the volume and the structure. We can tell when we project those images. Instantly, we know who has photographed which. It's a different way of thinking, it's a different eye, and I think we're consistently in touch with our material; maybe more than we are the other person's, even though I think I appreciate and have come to understand vicariously much more what the volume is about. My hands have felt it, and I've worked with it. I'm not the one who's created it, but I just think I understand that now a whole lot more.

I want that in the work, too. I used to, when I photographed, get very flat, two-dimensional photographs of

three-dimensional pieces. I could flatten them. Again, I think it shows how my eye has changed through the collaboration. I think that's been one of the real benefits. Lillian would point it out. That photograph didn't look right.

Elliott: I worked very hard to make things full, and I objected to the fact that they were flattened in the photo. Recently, I've enjoyed Pat's photographs of our collaborative things, and I have little by little backed out of photographing them. Partly, because my photographs are never quite sharp enough to really please her, or if they do, I'm always aware that I'm trying to please her with the sharpness.

Hickman: Publishers want it, too. I mean, it's not just me.

Elliott: Yes, you're right. But I don't care about them as much. I really care much more about our individual process of working together. I think Pat, until recently, wasn't doing baskets, and I was doing baskets all along.

When I photographed my things, and when I photograph our collaborative things, I'm basically looking for form and structure, because those are the things I'm most interested in, and I'm not as interested in translucency or light. I'm interested. It's a nice idea, but it's not what I look for, just like I don't look for a view when I look for a place to live. It's not my way of seeing.

So I think when I photograph both my baskets and our collaborative work, I'm looking for much the same thing. I want people to know that there's a difference in our work. When they see photographs of mine that are of the collaborative things, I don't think they're as aware that they are as different from my own baskets as they are when they see Pat's photographs of those things.

I think that's one of the reasons why those photographs please me. It's nice that those are the ones published of our work, because then people are aware that there's that much more difference, especially people who haven't seen the baskets in person.

Nathan: There is one called "Circle Helmet." Was that your photograph?

Hickman: Yes.

Nathan: I will never forget it.

Elliott: It's a beautiful photograph.

Nathan: Wonderful.

Hickman: Thank you.

Discussing Works in the Studio

Nathan: I wanted to ask you a little more about photography, which I think you answered beautifully. Somewhere along the line, if you're ready, could individual pieces be brought here so that you could talk about them? We can't walk around the room with the recorder.

Elliott: Oh, yes. Right. I was just aware of one thing as I sat here and looked. I had made a structure there, a bare round structure, that I thought that I would use as an individual piece. Over time, some time has passed since I originally did it, and I haven't gone ahead and done more with it, which is what I had originally planned. I thought since we need some work in the near future, and it would be nice to have new work, I thought recently it would be right to have Pat cover it. I think it would be an interesting collaborative basket.

As I was sitting here and looking over there, I realized that the one next to it is a real favorite of mine, that "Smoked Passage," the grey, rather irregular form. I realized just this morning, that I would rather have something more in the tradition of the grey one. That the other, especially if it became collaborative, would not be going in an adventurous way.

I think what I might do with it individually is unknown yet to me. It could be more inventive. But even if you covered it in an exciting new way, or didn't cover certain parts, I don't think you would end up with something that would be as exciting as the two baskets that flanked that one, that I find much more interesting.

So I was going to say, after our session, I don't think you [Pat] should cover that. I think I should go ahead and turn it into an individual basket, I should work toward making a basket that is more, not even irregular, more exciting in terms of form, and something we haven't done before.

Hickman: Yes. I feel this does represent an older way of working, and we certainly have done collaborative pieces which started out with forms more or less like that. It does feel like we're kind of going back, rather than going forward, but sometimes, things happen.

When I put gut on a form that Lillian gives me, sometimes it changes. The gut has a strength to cause the shape to change. We can't always be sure what's going to happen in the drying and the pulling in. Things shift. So it's maybe not as expected as we think. However, I feel that is much more, the other one, "Smoked Passage" is much more...

Nathan: What is it made out of?

Elliott: It's five-eighths inch rattan, oval rattan. It's tending toward furniture rattan in terms of size. So it holds its form. It doesn't warp as easily and get distorted as the things that are made with lighter weight material.

Nathan: I'm looking at the one in the corner.

Elliott: That's actually a round reed or a rattan that I recently started working with quite differently. It looks like barbed wire, I think.

Nathan: Yes, it does.

Elliott: Over there is one where...

Nathan: You know, we're going to have to have some photographs, so we can show what we're talking about.

Hickman: Fine.

Elliott: On the floor is one piece that I won't have Pat cover, that I like very much this way. It seems like it's maybe barbed wire. But it's changed once it's covered. It still looks sort of like barbed wire, but there's a different quality.

Hickman: Well, something else happens in the impression.

Nathan: It's hard to touch it?

Both: Oh, yes [Hickman and Elliott respond simultaneously].

Hickman: The structure underneath, pushing against the gut. I don't know. I feel sometimes the structure is almost more readable with a surface on it than when it is not covered.

Nathan: Is this beaded?

Elliott: Yes.

Hickman: Yes.

Nathan: And it is sort of an opalescent grey.

Elliott: Right. It's painted with acrylic paints.

Nathan: This is quite far along in your collaboration?

Hickman: This is recent, as of last week.

Elliott: We've been doing some. Mostly we've been doing individual work this past year, maybe year and a half. We've done a couple of pieces, and this was one of them.

Hickman: We call it "River Stone," and what's new about this one, I think, is Lillian's new choice of a material to work with, which is unlike what we've done. I think the gut caused the form to shift a bit, and that element of the unknown seems to me something that I would like us to continue to try for in whatever collaborative work we do. I just feel maybe to an outsider, the work looks related, one to another, and it is related, but for me, there are very significant differences in the development of one piece as opposed to another.

I do feel it's been a kind of forward movement, progression. I would like to feel that the collaboration requires that, and that at any point if we feel we're just repeating old forms, that to me, that feels it's dead. There's nothing to be gained in doing that.

Elliott: This material is a round reed, and it's the most boring of the basket materials. It's used in elementary schools when they teach basketry. It usually is a really uninteresting material for me, so I've never chosen to work with it.

I bought this reed because it was dyed and I liked the color. When I began working with it, I realized I didn't want to use it in the simple old way that most people had done with it. So I twisted it and was surprised to see how much it resembled barbed wire in twisting. I had no idea that would happen.

Nathan: This is such a good way to begin. Can't we then go back to one that you think of as possibly leading up toward this one?

Elliott: Well, we did. Uh, oh. I don't know.

Nathan: Or whatever you would like to talk about.

Elliott: For a while, we did baskets where Pat would cover both inside and outside. Then we did a series that was stressing either inside or outside. Though I like this piece, it's an older piece, I've

recently become more interested in it again, and I think Pat did too.

Hickman: Could I just say...

Elliott: Sure.

Hickman: If you look at the structure of this, it's much more dense, and it's a flatter reed. They're just very different qualities that it has which I think were indicative of work we were doing--I don't remember, probably in '83?

Elliott: I think it's later, but I'm not sure.

Hickman: Anyway, there were not the openings, the pared down look that came after Lausanne, which was in '85.

Nathan: That's interesting. Your structures became much more open and less dense?

Elliott: That was because I was working with that heavier material and Pat could cover larger spaces. Before that, often, the spaces had to be limited because of the way Pat was working.

Hickman: Another thing that happened in this piece and on a series we did was that in the rubbing, afterwards, with a metallic crayon stick, the plaited pattern, the structural pattern underneath, was picked up. I think recently, we haven't done pieces where we were treating it in the same way. The same desire to bring out the structure through the rubbing hasn't happened recently, I think. I don't know.

Elliott: I think there was one. I don't feel that I'm at all finished with that. On those bundles, I was rubbing bundles for the structure.

Hickman: The bundles. Right. Right. For the fibrous quality.

Elliott: Well, no. I felt for the structure to show, because of the rubbing. That was really why I rubbed it.

Gut with Memory of a Structure

Nathan: There's a wrapped bottle that I'm thinking of. I don't know if it would be the "Almost Roman Glass" or...

Hickman: Like a bound bottle?

Nathan: Yes. I saw a picture of one that had lots more covering on it. This is certainly something I'd like to talk about.

Elliott: That was a strange collaboration, because I had done pottery before, and Pat was covering the pottery, so that was the collaboration there. Then I treated the surface with marbleizing or India inks afterward. It was quite a different process there, because Pat was building the whole thing with gut using my ceramic forms underneath, temporarily.

Hickman: Yes. Lillian had said that some of her pots were very heavy, and that she never was quite happy with the weight of them. It seemed a kind of joke to cover them and get the memory of the shape of those pots and a sensation that they were weightless. I mean, the gut itself weighs almost nothing.

So we did a whole series of pieces which were primarily of gut with no structure left within. I just covered these forms, molded the gut around them, and then would cut through one area of gut, peel it off, and then have the gut seal itself up again with more wet gut on top of the dried gut.

We did just a whole series of forms. Some were much more classical...

Elliott: The watering can.

Hickman: Yes.

Nathan: The iridescent gold watering can?

Hickman: Right.

Nathan: I'd love to touch these.

Hickman: Yes, please.

Nathan: There is the impression of twisted fiber in this?

Elliott: It was a small bottle that I had made in ceramics, and then I wrapped it with rope, and then the impression of the rope came through but with weightlessness.

Hickman: We called it "Bound Bottle," and we really were interested in Roman glass. Some that we did were very, very closely related to beautiful Roman glass. Others were over forms like toothpaste tubes and, you know, we had a whole series.

Elliott: I even did some new things. I took some existing bowls and added coils of plasticene and rope, and then Pat could cover anything that we wanted.

Hickman: Still can.

Nathan: Sounds like fun.

Elliott: Yes. It was fun.

Hickman: Yes. It was an exhibit we had at Textiles by Design. Several people still talk about how that show seemed very light and kind of humorous. We had sixty objects, I think in it. There was a lot of fun that was conveyed in those particular pieces, I think. We liked the idea that over time, one can collaborate. The work Lillian had done was what, 25, 30 years ago in the ceramics. This was an updating, a kind of way to return to some of that, but in an entirely different way.

Collaborative Work as a Separate Entity

Elliott: It's interesting that some people respond very much more to our collaborative work than they do, for instance, to my individual work, and vice versa. Some people have said "I don't understand why you collaborate when you get something that is worthwhile with the individual work." It's just a very strange thing. Sometimes, I think people are interested in it because of the feminist issue, that there are two women working together. Sometimes it's the collaborative issue, and sometimes it's the relationship with native materials. Sometimes it's the translucency.

They come to it from all different points of view. It's sort of interesting that the work appeals to so wide a range of people. Some people really don't like it at all.

Nathan: It does suggest that not only do you each have such an individual character in your own work, but that the collaboration is another.

Hickman: A separate entity.

Elliott: Oh, yes.

Hickman: It really is. We have collaborated in teaching quite a bit. Sometimes when there aren't many jobs in an area, it's felt that it made sense to share a job, rather than to each try to get that

job. I think we have enjoyed the collaborative teaching, that we really like the dialog that can happen and have chosen to present courses, or suggest courses where it really was the two of us, rather than one. Sometimes that means splitting a salary, which is again, one of the complicated things about collaboration.

When we got an N.E.A. grant for the collaborative work, we split it. There are things about it that are confusing. The National Endowment for the Arts, I think is not really clear about how to handle this kind of creature. If you're an individual artist, you're an individual artist. Under the category of individual artist's grant, one may be given for collaborative work (to be divided).

But, we're both committed to that, as we are to our individual artwork. So, I don't know. I think perhaps as more people collaborate, guidelines for dealing with this kind of way of working may get clarified, as they are not now. We run into it all the time.

Elliott: I do feel penalized some of the time, and as though institutions don't really understand collaboration. When we sell something, we have to divide the salary in half.

Hickman: Hardly a salary.

Elliott: And that's very difficult. Not a salary, but I mean...

Nathan: A dream of wealth.

Hickman: Right.

Elliott: We have laundry money for the object.

Large Projects and the Bas-Relief Effect

Nathan: Yes. I want to come back to these two wall hangings, and a reference to "Mid-Ribs of Coconut Palm Dipped in India Ink Bundled Together with Gut."

Hickman: A piece called "Charcoal Drawing," was probably one of the more ambitious collaborative pieces that we've done. It was about ten feet high by about ten or eleven feet across. It was like a giant screen. I did the gut part and I also prepared the materials, the dyeing of the reeds, then would hand these units as I finished them to Lillian, and then she would bundle it all together and tie it.

Elliott: Yes. It wouldn't be individual. They called them mid-ribs, but there's a name that they're called in the florist's shop. I've just suddenly forgotten.

Hickman: It's "ting ting."

Elliott: "Ting ting," yes. I would then tie them together in smaller bundles and eventually into larger bundles.

Nathan: How long would it be?

Hickman: About three feet each. Something like that.

Elliott: I would work first with several elements, put them together, and then tie those to a larger part, and eventually it looked and felt as though I were making a giant drawing. I called it "Charcoal Drawing" because looking at my wall from a distance that's what it looked like.

It's funny, that the three-dimensional piece was in your house.

Hickman: I know.

Elliott: And the sort of two-dimensional one was in mine. I had a bigger wall, and you had a larger room.

Hickman: Yes. This was before we shared a studio. We used to work in our homes, and I would come to Lillian's one day a week to do collaborative work, or she would come to my house. We did that for a number of years.

Elliott: Yes. We've only had the studio for about two and a half years.

Nathan: Was that since Pacific Basin closed?

Elliott: Well actually, after it closed, we were part of a studio downstairs, a larger group. We didn't find that as satisfactory. It's much nicer to be in an enclosed space and just be working together. The other felt too open and had too many other people involved.

Nathan: Is there anything more you wanted to say about this two-dimensional thing? It must have been a little three-dimensional.

Elliott: Oh, it became three-dimensional. It was actually maybe five or six inches out from the wall eventually. But it still felt like a drawing, like a bas-relief on a wall.

Nathan: Are you interested in that?

Elliott: Oh, yes.

Hickman: Yes. After we made the large three-dimensional piece ["Romany"] for Lausanne, it had to be cut apart in order to ship it to Switzerland, as you know. We ended up feeling that the most successful gift from that piece was the individual units, which we put on the wall before they were assembled back together. We really liked the bas-relief effect and the wall pieces that came from working large. That's a whole direction that we would like to pursue. We just haven't had the chance to do as much with that as we'd like.

Elliott: It's a major, ambitious thing, though, to think of doing a large piece. I think we've had pressures of time and energy, and...

Hickman: Teaching.

Elliott: Things that we had to do. The idea of doing that really means you put yourself into a large project that requires a lot. I think neither of us was quite ready to do that.

Hickman: But I think we're still interested.

Connection with Textile History

Elliott: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, we're still interested in...

Hickman: Everything. Nothing quite finishes. One thing I wanted to say, which I think is true for me, is I feel my interest in textile history has really spilled into my own artwork as a reference, as an historic point from which I then go my own individual way. Sometimes it's been more closely related to the historic reference than not, but increasingly I feel that I just can reflect back on how that's worked as one way of entering art.

For Lillian, I think you've expressed the fact that you feel art's been a way of entering history. Almost that your interest in doing art has meant that you've also wanted to know more about the historic stuff. You should say how it is for you, but I feel we have kind of approached this sometimes in slightly different ways.

Elliott: I think I'm genuinely interested in textile history as well as a thing almost by itself, not necessarily related to my own artwork. I don't think my own work is generated by textile

history most of the time. I think it comes from just a visual approach to things.

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Nathan: You were speaking about your interest in textile history.

Elliott: Right. I think for me it's not as direct a source of inspiration or direction as it is in Pat's work. I'm very interested in drawing from textile history, but I don't think it is necessarily as much a part of my work. It's not the beginning point most of the time.

Asian Esthetic in Joint Work

Nathan: I might just throw out a question for you to take or not as you wish. You did win some recognition in this Japanese competition. "Vine Basket" and "Bound Bottle" were illustrated. And I wondered whether there's some connection to Asian Art?

Elliott: That comes out of...

Hickman: A long time ago. Yes.

Nathan: Right. In 1982, the Roman Glass series? Do you feel an Asian influence in your work?

Elliott: I don't think so. I was around in ceramics when Japanese and Korean esthetics were very important as an influence. When Peter Voulkos first began getting recognition in ceramics, his work was very Japanese in feel. I've always admired that and been interested in Asian ceramics and in Asian art, but I don't think that it has influenced my work. I think I'm more interested myself, at least now, in Indonesian art, but I don't think that it's part of my work.

Hickman: I would disagree. I see in your baskets, I admire in your baskets, the same kind of wildness that I feel the best of the Japanese baskets have with irregular elements and unexpected ways of plaiting and joining. I don't know. I just have felt that of contemporary basket makers, that's a feeling that you have for putting stuff together that I associate more closely with really some of those old smoked bamboo baskets that I don't feel I see elsewhere in wood baskets.

I don't think it's direct, but it's a linking that I have in my mind. And I would just say that of our purest, like our

very purest baskets, this white-lined "Windsail," there is something about the simplicity of it and the purity of it that we don't set out to try for. I feel that that is in my mind, when I see photographs of a piece like this. It brings to mind something of a Japanese esthetic which I don't think we set out to try for.

Elliott: I think occasionally in our joint work, we get something that is reminiscent of Japanese things, but I don't feel that about my own work. I think it's closer to abstract expressionism or to line drawings. I love the Japanese smoked bamboo baskets, but I don't feel that my work is particularly related.

I don't think you have that many choices when you put together form. You either do things that repeat or that don't repeat. And then within the non-repeat, or the "don't repeat" area, some of them use irregular elements.

Nathan: This one, just as Pat is putting it away, that's covered with gut on both inside and outside?

Hickman: Right, right.

Elliott: That's covered with a heavy reed.

Nathan: And then it's painted?

Elliott: Yes, with acrylics. White acrylic.

Hickman: With that whole series of collaborative work we did very much based on Japanese helmets.

Elliott: True, but I think...

Hickman: We went to a show together at the Asian Art Museum called "Splendid Helmets." We were just delighted with the vigor and, I don't know, the pleasure, the whole part of that. We came back, and forms suddenly were directly influenced by some quality in that. I'm not trying to make helmets like those helmets, but I do think there are some ways in which influence appears. And the Japanese bag you made...

Elliott: Yes, but I think it's more with the collaborative work. That's all I'm saying.

Hickman: Okay.

Elliott: Occasionally, the collaborative work is more directly related to particularly Japanese things.

Hickman: We once saw an exhibit together of some African baskets that were at the Lowie Museum, in the hall cases outside. Again, the rawness and the power of those were qualities that we were interested in trying to get in our own work, very much more than trying to make an African basket. We're not African basketmakers, and we're not Japanese basketmakers.

So it's a feeling of some almost emotional quality and power of a piece, a strength of a piece that speaks to us, wherever we are. When we were in Arizona at the museum there, I think we saw a Tarahumara pot that had wonderful skin strips on the outside of it.

I think we're just seeing things, wherever they're from, that speak to us of something that I either know I can try for in my material, or with it. Some of those individual bags of yours, Lillian, they're so related to skin bags.

Elliott: Oh, I don't think of that, but I think of this one near the door as being related to Indonesian things.

Hickman: Very much so. In color.

Elliott: Well, in the stenciling. That's an odd one for me. I don't think that that's the usual procedure. I think usually my things are not as directly related as this one here. They feel very physical and intuitive, in general, my own individual baskets; occasionally, very exciting like the abstract expressionist things, and so the activity somehow comes through in the basket. But I think more of the textile, the historical textile references, in our work, and especially the Japanese with the purity of the form.

Hickman: Right, right.

Elliott: On the joint work.

Nathan: I'm thinking of the element of weight. I was so taken with these wonderful light bottles and watering cans. You have spanned from the almost no-weight to the very heavy weight. You were talking about the "Romany" piece, for example. Is weight something that is important to you?

Elliott: We don't get weight much in our work, because the gut is weightless.

Hickman: My stuff is just really almost weightless; you can't even measure the weight.

Nathan: Yes.

Elliott: On the large piece for Lausanne, it needed to be sound, structurally. So in order to be sound when it was that large--it was more than six feet square--it needed to have some kind of substance.

Nathan: I'd like to go back again just a moment. We were talking about whether Asian art was an influence to you. Did you have something you wanted to say about whether it influenced you? Either of you?

Hickman: No, I don't think so. I think in fact when I was a graduate student, I had just about had it with all of the interest in kimonos. I had moved here from the East Coast, where I hadn't been surrounded by an interest in kimonos, and it just hit me that every artist seemed to feel that this was a form and a way of working. I rejected that for a very long time.

I think it limited what I was able to see and enjoy of kimonos, traditional historic ones, because I was just put off by it here as such a prevalent theme for a while in the seventies. You know, maybe I tried hard not to come anywhere close to thinking about Asian textiles. I don't feel that way now at all, but it was a phase that I passed through.

Elliott: I think one of the differences as well in our individual work is that Pat has been interested in costume, and I am not. I'm interested in it, but it's not part of my work.

Nathan: Western American Indian artifacts haven't influenced you? Or have they?

Hickman: Well, yes, the idea of skin as a material. There is beauty of rawhide and skin clothing. Even though I think I've never worked with leather, I've not worked with rawhide, I admire what Native Americans have done with it so much. I think just in looking at it, I respond to it. I don't think that there are any pieces that come to my mind that I've done which are a direct link to particular historic Native American pieces that I know.

Though, when I first started working with gut, the first piece I did was a child's gut parka with hog casings and sponge, small colored cut sponge bits as embellishments, as seam embellishment, which was not at all what a Yup'ik Eskimo would use, but I was wanting to understand how those gut strips were used to build a piece. The form I chose as a first piece was one more closely related to a historic piece than anything else I've done since. But it was a beginning of working with that material. And then I have tried, obviously, to go my own way with it.

Nathan: I keep looking back at some more of these structures that you've made. Perhaps we can talk about them.

Elliott: There is one that is very influenced by Japanese styles. That's this piece, which has a Japanese name. It's called "Kabuto" because I think that was the name for "Splendid Helmet" in the show that we saw. So we called it by that name. The show we saw was just crazy. It was a wide collection of assorted helmets that had some magical qualities, that were supposed to frighten off the enemy. It had enormous vigor. We were really, both of us, very taken with it.

I suddenly realize that there was one historical show that did influence me, I felt. That was a Korean Folk Art show. But it didn't influence me in form at all. It influenced me in thinking about color. I didn't use the same colors at all that they used. I just liked the clarity of color that they had, and I changed the colors I used then.

Nathan: Is that the piece called "Yi Dynasty"?

Elliott: That's right. That's when I came home and painted everything in sight with bright, clear colors instead of black. I really liked the sensation of looking at those baskets with new color. I don't think that that's quite as direct as what's happened in these.

Nathan: No. I appreciated the way you answered that question, because I'm sure it has influences, whatever they are. They don't come directly from A to B. They move around and emerge maybe years later?

Exploring Capacities of Materials

Hickman: Right. One thing that I feel is new that's happening in our individual work now, is that I am very much wanting to use gut as structure instead of needing stiffer elements, reeds or wire or whatever. I'm trying to see how the gut can stand by itself.

For example, in this piece, what I'm doing is working with a single strand of intestine as a linear element and doing a non-loom structure with it, a looping structure or a knotted netting, knotless netting, whichever one I choose to work with, I'm using it to push the limit of how tall, how large, how big I can get and not have this material in any way collapse onto itself. This

is a new way of working for me, to have the gut be the structure, and maybe the skin as well.

In Lillian's work, I'm seeing now that she's using bark in somewhat the same way that I've used gut over the collaborative pieces, where the bark cloth becomes a kind of skin. Not always with structure, it may be its own. I just think this is something that's happening.

Elliott: I don't think that's directly from our working together, though, because before we worked together, I had done work of that kind. It wasn't just always skeletal.

But before that, in Detroit, I worked with area as well, with tonal areas of paper and other materials. And also when I was a potter, I didn't usually pierce holes in the thing, although I did do that sometimes. I worked with form and not always the skeletal form.

Part of the reason I'm doing these with bark cloth, or bark paper, is that it's a material that's suddenly available that hasn't been, or at least that I wasn't aware of before. I don't think the same thing happens with it as happens with the gut.

Hickman: No, I don't either.

Elliott: I think of the tautness of the gut as a particular quality that happens in our collaborative work. I don't have any of the same sensation with what I'm doing with bark paper.

Hickman: I'm certainly not trying to use gut in the same way that you're using reed in structure. But I do think my use of it in this way is an outgrowth of the collaboration, in that I'm wanting to provide some of that myself, so that I can make three-dimensional forms when I want to.

Elliott: Sure.

Nathan: You have there what looks like a lacy basket.

Hickman: Yes. This piece has words, the word "should," written many, many times on paper, and then peeled off of the paper. I call it "Tyranny of the Shoulds." These words sort of hang down on the outside and on the inside as tassels. But it does look very, very lacy.

Elliott: In a psychology class of mine when we studied Karen Horney, the teacher summed up Horney's philosophy by saying she believed in the "Tyranny of the Shoulds." That was an idea that Pat was very excited about.

Hickman: Yes. I liked that phrase. I hadn't read that reference, but that was a definite influence.

Nathan: Now, you've done something to the gut to make it like rather stiff string?

Hickman: Well, it becomes like that as it dries, just a single strand. I work with it wet, as a long linear element, and I can just write with it, or have a kind of endless line. Here I've looped these, a technique called knotless netting, over a form. As the water goes out, as the element dries, it shrivels up and becomes stiff, it's more like rawhide than anything else.

Nathan: It looks like if it were magnified, the rawhide on chairs would be like that. Was there a form in the middle when you wove this?

Hickman: It dried over a form, and I peeled it off of the form then, and I think I changed the shape quite a bit. I can't even remember what I used as the form on this one.

Nathan: Was that true of that box that's to your left?

Hickman: Yes, right. This is also a recent individual piece of mine.

Nathan: I don't see any of the forms of your collaborative work that have a net over them.

Hickman: No, not yet. You know, I think that's something that could happen. I think it is nothing that we've explored so far.

Nathan: I don't suggest that it should be, I was just trying to see. You make all these wonderful ideas come to mind. There are some ominous looking bundles over there. Is that a recent development?

Hickman: These are mine. This is what you mean?

Nathan: Yes.

Hickman: I've done these two pieces, part of a series called "Family: Matters of the Heart." I guess they suggest heads, sort of simple, almost like rock shrines, except that they're much lighter weight than that. And then the metallic paper square is very, very carefully placed, not accidentally. Inside the smaller form, there are two others, of different colors, which live inside that form, almost as part of a nested family.

Nathan: These are very beautiful.

Are there some other collaborative things that you would like to talk about? They all look of interest to me. I'd like you to pick something you'd like to expand on.

Elliott: I think those bundles. That was the only thing I was thinking of, too.

Nathan: Now this is yours?

Elliott: It is. Right. One of the problems with the collaboration is that since I do baskets that are very related in form to the things that I do for the collaborative ones, it's hard to separate procedure sometimes for both of them.

When I first began, I was doing these folded bark paper things and was very interested in what I was getting. They were like throw-aways. They were very thick and spontaneous. Pat thought that they could have more substance if they were covered with gut and asked if I would be willing to have her cover one of them. I thought it was a good idea. When it was covered with gut, then it could be painted and rubbed in a different way.

So we did a group of these bundles. I also continued working individually on "bundles" afterward, and I'm not at all done with that. It's not the end of my individual work in that direction. We've always been both interested in what happened on the collaborative bundles. Galleries never know what to do with them, because they don't stand. That was even sort of appealing to me, that there would be this whole group of them, lying down on a table. It's hard to exhibit them because they don't stand in the traditional way. They seem as though they should be cast in bronze. We both would love that.

Nathan: Absolutely. Is it possible to cast the substance in bronze?

Elliott: I think it would be.

Hickman: Yes.

Elliott: It's just expensive to do.

Nathan: I'm sort of interested in the patina, and the color of bronze.

Elliott: I think that they really feel as though they're sculpture, and they would be appropriate for bronze.

Nathan: Let them get green?

Elliott: Yes. It would be nice.

Hickman: Yes. I like picking up rust marks. I've been playing with that some in my own work. I've a little gut watering can. It still has those rust marks, which I really enjoy. I think the metallic suggestion--when we cover something with a metallic stick--is really playing with a lighter weight material but implying a much heavier kind of object.

Jurors' Criteria

Nathan: You spoke a little earlier of a juried show. You both have had experience being jurors. I wonder if each one would tell me about what the criteria are. What is it that you look for as a juror in selecting something that should go into a show?

Elliott: I look for personal statement. I want something that's as sound as possible in terms of construction, but more important than that, I think I want something else. I try to think of whether or not it deserves to be shown, whether it needs this show in order to have it seen in the world.

Hickman: Yes. I think the esthetic quality is the most important thing to me. I do probably keep in mind what the total show is trying for; and if it's a show that has a particular theme, or for one reason or another would be a stronger show if a certain piece were included rather than excluded.

Lillian and I have juried together, which I think is another kind of collaborative experience that we both prefer to jurying alone. We work well together. I think we can make piles of pieces that we feel definitely should not be included, others absolutely "yes," and then deal with the "maybe's."

Though I think we have a very different eye, somehow I've not felt that that was a difficult working together.

Elliott: That's the easiest time.

Hickman: It's been fun.

Elliott: I think it's easier than our own work.

Hickman: Yes. We've enjoyed that.

Elliott: Because jurying, I think, is a very hard job otherwise. It really does make you question all of your decisions, what makes something acceptable or not acceptable to you. It's very nice to be reassured by somebody who is with you, who doesn't necessarily

agree, but at least you can trust one another to be able to have a broad vision. That is what you'd like to have.

Hickman: Yes, and I think the mutual respect for how the other person is evaluating something is a confirmation as well of how you're doing a similar kind of thing. I think that's worked well.

Present and Future of Fiber Art

Nathan: Over the years one sometimes reads obituaries for fiber art, and sometimes that fiber art is sweeping the country. I gather that it does continue to change, and wonder whether there is anything you would want to say about what you would like to see as developments in the future.

Elliott: Well, it somehow seems sad to me that so many people have found weaving dowdy today; glass, which is magical and instant, is where so much interest has been shifted to. Though I love glass, and I know that a lot goes on before and after the magic moment, there's something to be said for the building up quietly, slowly, of the thinking process, just as it is in weaving or in painting, where you're quietly thinking about it and imagining it being completed in several different ways.

I have always found textiles a very exciting area to work in, because of the materials and the techniques, rather than what else is going on in the field.

Hickman: I hope that there will be strong institutions where teaching of the field is not vulnerable. I sort of feel that there have been enormous losses with certain programs not continuing. For me, the field deserves, without question, a place in academic institutions, and that that's one of the ways in which the excitement and building of the field continues. It deserves a real sense of acceptance as part of an equal expression of visual arts. That I feel is my attitude, that painting and sculpture and fiber arts are equal. I just feel it's working with different materials.

Sometimes I think fiber arts have been sort of pushed to the side, and I would like to feel that at some point, that isn't the way it is. As I read those same obituaries, I feel, "Well, it works for me, whether it's in or not. I expect to be doing this the rest of my life."

I don't feel that people have lost interest. It seems that maybe they're working quietly in their homes more than a few

years ago, when they were connected with a school that's closed or what not. Some of the network has not continued in the same way, here in the Bay Area anyway.

But I don't feel that it's died, or that it's on its way out. I just think things have changed, and maybe the visibility is not as obvious as it was in the seventies. I don't know.

Nathan: What do you think, if anything, will succeed after the closing of the Design Department at UC Berkeley? Is there something, some venture, that can pick up what seems to have been lost there?

Elliot: I don't know.

Hickman: Yes. Nothing has emerged at this point.

Elliot: I thought it was a sign of hope that there was a Design Department with a textile program, as well as a glass program and ceramics at Berkeley. I think it's very sad that that's been lost. I thought that would be the direction that things would go, that there would be more universities that would recognize the value of this.

In a way, I suppose, it may happen through art departments expanding to include that. But it hasn't happened. That has not happened, sadly, and I'm not quite sure what the change is going to be. It's hard to tell.

Nathan: There's a Design Department at UC Davis.

Elliot: Yes

Nathan: Is that relatively young?

Hickman: There's no graduate program, however, as part of that. I feel that's crucial to having the kind of development and strength and influence that is needed.

Impact of UC Berkeley's Design Department##

Hickman: I was saying something about the enormous impact that the UC Berkeley Design Department has had on the fiber art field. This continues to be real.

Just this last weekend, Joanne Bradford gave a lecture on netting at an exhibit that she was a consultant for, on the East Coast. All or almost all of the contemporary artists who are

working in knots and netting are ones who were either students of Ed Rossbach's, students of Lillian's, or second generation students of people who trained here.

That hasn't really been documented adequately, but the Bay Area, the influence of the strength of that department and the teachers of that department, have spread in waves across the country. At this point, many people may not know that a student in New Jersey was a student of someone who had studied here, but there is a link. I think that's a kind of affirmation to me that a really remarkable department just didn't die.

Elliott: I was shocked to see that. You go out and see those slides--it was from a national show "Knots and Nets"--how many of those people were students of students of mine or Ed Rossbach's. There were more that were students themselves. It was just shocking. I had not realized that before.

Hickman: I don't think the show set out to in any way speak to that. But it just became clear as we were in the audience watching these images, well of course so and so had studied with someone. You know, we could push it back to the institution and to the source where some of that began.

So that's my hope. I don't know where, I don't know how, I don't know who can make that happen. I hope that it would be documented as it already has happened in a very clear way that gives credit where it is due.

Nathan: That's interesting. You, I gather, had not really thought about it in those terms until you saw that show.

Elliott: Oh, but I realized who some of the students were and who their instructors were. It's a direct line.

Personal Future Direction

Nathan: Would you like to speculate about what might be in the future for you? What directions you'd like to follow?

Hickman: Oh, I think I would like to just continue doing what I do, which is giving myself as much time as I possibly can to explore whatever visual direction I'm most excited about; and I long for more time to have that growth and change happen. I can't really say where it will be ten years from now. The thing that is clear is that it will keep going and that I will keep doing artwork. There's no doubt in my mind about that.

I have ideas of exhibits that I would like to guest curate. For me that is a kind of parallel visual expression that I don't feel finished with. I've curated about four or five shows and continue to think of ones that I'd like to try to present as ideas. I feel that though it's different from the creative artwork, for me it's another way that feeds me and affects how I see things. Exhibits have worked for me in a powerful way, affecting my own artwork. I just do feel that that's a contribution I would like to imagine that I might be able to make.

Elliott: I was just looking at the net that I have on the wall that's made with twining, and I like the idea that I started out making a basket, and then it was clear that it really was nicer on the wall. This was going to be a basket when I first began. I could have made it into the basket, but it's much more interesting on the wall. I feel that I have to have that, have to allow that open quality in terms of direction, because I'm not at all sure in what direction I want to go. I know I will continue doing some three-dimensional things. I recently was doing some sculpture. My plans changed midway, but what was exciting about it was that I remembered how wonderful it was to do sculpture again. Somehow, everything I've ever done in art has stayed exciting to me. I haven't lost interest in any of it.

So I just want to be able to allow as much time as possible to do a lot of work and see where it goes. I'm not really sure.

Nathan: Is there any kind of interest that we haven't touched on that you would like to bring up or mention? Anything that you've been thinking about that you'd like to say?

Hickman: Nothing, I mean, I think we've covered quite a lot.

Nathan: I know it. We've covered a good deal. I certainly thank you very much. It's been a great session.

VII DIRECTIONS AND INTERESTS IN ART

[Interview 4: May 8, 1989]##

Nathan: That was an interesting session with you and Pat Hickman. It was wonderfully revealing, and you explained so clearly.

I gather now we can go back again to the work that you do as an individual, and continue to do all the time that you are actually doing the collaborating.

Just to get us going, I made a note to ask you about whether you had an interest in lace?

Elliott: I am interested in lace, but I haven't done a great deal of it. I did do some bobbin lace, not very traditional. I did it with heavier materials, and in very large scale. I didn't pursue it far enough.

From Filet Lace to Nets

Elliott: As I said earlier, I learned netting in order to do filet lace, because it's necessary to have a foundation of square-knotted netting underneath. I learned that, and found it so pure and simple that I didn't want to put anything on it. I discovered, when I did lots of netting--maybe because it's so simple, it's just a series of squares attached to one another--that the simplicity could sort of free me. If I used unusual or interesting materials, then the viewer could see the materials, and not the squares. It was the way it is with theatrical conventions, people don't see them. Or I could emphasize them if I wanted the audience to see the squares.

Once I gave a talk in Ed Rossbach's class about netting when he was teaching a non-loom class. He had asked me to talk about netting, and he was very surprised that I thought of

netting in terms of squares. He was aware of the knots, the little dots in between. It was a whole different thing. Since then, I see the knots and the squares.

I began first with netting to see what would happen if I worked with unusual materials in large scale.

Nathan: What kind of materials would these be?

Elliott: Oh, heavy cord or nylon, or reserve-dyed yarns. I made a piece that was eight feet by eight feet that was four layers over one another. I didn't plan to do anything that big, I just got very interested in what happened.

Nathan: How big were the squares?

Elliott: About an inch or an inch and a half. The layers were of different materials, but several of the layers were made of pre-dyed yarn. If you use it in something that's different from what it's dyed for, you get different patterns.

It seemed to me that what I was doing was making something that was like, oh, Mark Tobey, where there was a lot of activity on the surface; so as you walked by, you got a different message as you moved, as you saw different patterns in the layers.

Nathan: Didn't I see a picture of something like that?

Elliott: You might have seen one of them.

Nathan: Yes. It was sort of mysterious.

Elliott: Right, right. Then I went on. Actually, I got very interested in nets. First I thought, "What am I doing?" I had started to make these nets so I could put something on them, and I liked them better without anything applied.

I was puzzled because it wasn't what I had thought I was going to be doing. It never is, but I was surprised at this whole little switch. But I went on and worked for a couple of years, actually, just doing nets. I began to see that I could do nets as tapestries. That is, I could get the same kind of emotional impact that you get from tapestries if I did netting over itself, in color patterns. I could make things quite complex and interesting.

So I did that. I don't think I ever did it enough. I have to go back some time and do more. I'm not finished with netting. But I did do a couple of nets that were more complex and tapestry-like.

Then I did a whole series that were not that. I did some where I tried doing layers of nets over themselves on the same surface. That is, I did five layers working almost like a Cy Twombly painting, you know his work where there's all this activity, and you feel the motion of it, more than almost anything else.

I didn't go on to make traditional lace.

Nathan: How interesting you followed this path of the netting. When you work on something of that size, is it done on a frame?

Elliott: No. On my lap. Then I put it up on the wall and step back and look at it to see if it's big enough or what it's doing.

And then later I realized that I could just make a patch and make it a triangle if I wanted, or make it a square and put layers and layers of them over one another so that you would have a near transparency of this sort. I think you've seen a couple of these illustrations.

When I did that, actually the last one, I didn't have any wall space. I put it over, not that cloth but this one, that one's a printed replica of the Bokharan ikat. It's sort of fun to see. I didn't print it; it's from France. I bought it in Sweden, but it's from France. It's fake, you know, it's a printed one. But this is a "real" ikat from Bokhara. I put my net up next to it, and I loved seeing the watermelon shapes through it. So I then thought, "It's a kind of weaver's in-joke," and I netted the watermelon shapes into the piece. Just like that's a fake, but the fake itself has some life that's different from the original. So I netted these watermelon shapes, and I got very interested in what, in fact, was happening with that. Some time I'll go back to that.

Nathan: Did this experience with the netting carry over in other work that you did? Can you trace any connection?

Elliott: Well, I can't yet. What I was trying for was something that had followed over from something else that had happened before the netting. I'm sure the netting will follow over and do something more another time. I did these a long time ago, and I thought that maybe the netting would, in fact, influence other things, but as far as I can see, it hasn't. It was nice for me to do something that wasn't opaque and dense and heavy, because everything I had ever done before then was very heavy.

Cardweaving

Elliott: That lap robe that's there is a woven lap robe with bands of cardweaving in between. It's the only useful thing I've ever made.

Nathan: These are strips that you have brought together?

Elliott: These are cardwoven strips that I wove on a backstrap type loom: It was right at the beginning of my weaving career. I didn't have the courage to make a big rug, but I did have the courage to make small strips, and I loved cardweaving. So I then put it together in bands.

Normally I'm not concerned with utility, but this, I think, its purpose is not so much to keep me warm as to bring the sun in. I like the idea of it as a lap robe.

Nathan: Oh, yes. We'll want to be thinking about which objects you will want to have photographed.

Elliott: Right.

Nathan: Everything I see, I think, "That's what we're looking at and talking about." But I must leave it to you to choose the pictures.

Elliott: I probably would put in my most recent, but we'll see.

Nathan: This lap robe has a very springy, wonderful look.

Elliott: Thank you. I did this really right at the beginning, and I still enjoy it a great deal, but it's not in any sense typical of anything.

Nathan: Well that certainly does bring the light in exactly as you said.

Elliott: Yes, I think it's nice on a gloomy day.

Collapse and Twist

Nathan: In an earlier session, you showed me some beautiful collapse fabrics, and I wondered whether that's something that still engages your attention.

Elliott: Absolutely. I'm fascinated by it. I'm not quite sure why. That is, I think it's almost the simplicity, the fact that it all goes back to just the yarn itself, almost the early stages of the yarn. It's how much twist is in the yarn, and then what you do with it, how you combine it, and how you use that twist with itself.

Nathan: Now you do not provide the twist? You buy it when it's already twisted?

Elliott: Right. I find yarn that has the twist I want. If I have yarn. I can add twist to it, though the way that I like to work at the moment, I want to have enough of it so I can really do a lot of experimentation. I don't really spin. I've had other people add twist but I still would like more quantity than I can easily get if I have somebody else add spin.

So I prefer finding yarn that for one reason or another is problematic for most weavers because it's too twisted, or I combine it with yarn that has very little twist, or I put different twists together, or different fibers. It just seems such a basic procedure that I'm very interested in it, and it does stay interesting. As a matter of fact, I've begun to do historical research on crêpes. I want to know how crêpe yarn or crêpe cloth has been made in the past in different parts of the world, and who still weaves it. It's trendy at the moment to people. In the last few years, people have really been making springy, lightweight crêpe in several countries.

Nathan: Was this particularly true in Japan?

Elliott: Yes, I think so.

Nathan: You won an award there.

Elliott: Yes. But there's also a designer who's been working with something much like that in Japan, but getting it with a more complicated weave structure. I'm more interested in the simpler weave structure.

But even so, Japan and India has always done some of it. I've seen beautiful crêpe from Korea. In textiles from Greece and Turkey and China I've found some, and just recently, a friend sent me some old obis from Japan that are quite wonderful. I've tried to analyze them.

Nathan: Are these silk?

Elliott: No, they're not. Excuse me.

Nathan: That's fine. [Elliott getting something in background, unwrapping it]. Let's see, they look like dark, dark grey. But this is collapse, right?

Elliott: Yes, right. They're black and white really. In this one, it's the way in which it's woven, rather than the yarn. We think that that's what it is. That is, I asked Nora Rogers in Santa Cruz, and she looked at it with me. She has sort of figured out one possible way it might have been woven. But you see, it opens up more. It's just this part that pulls in so. And this, I'm not sure at all. I have to look at it under a microscope and see. But you see, it pulls way out. That's right. It's at least twice as wide as it first appears.

Nathan: And these are selvage edges?

Elliott: Right.

Nathan: So is this woven to do this?

Elliott: Yes. It always feels good. I'm not quite sure yet what the fibers are. The structure and the way it's done is sort of interesting. That is, it's partly with twist, and it's partly, at least on one of these, it's partly with structure.

Nathan: Yes. A little earlier you were speaking about the netting, and saying that you were looking at the squares, Ed Rossbach was looking at the knots. Would this in any way connect with other work that was done at the Rhode Island School of Design on the Jacquard loom, where you have to prepare designs on special paper?

Elliott: No, it has nothing to do with the Jacquard loom.

The Jacquard Loom: Tradition and Requirements

Nathan: You actually were at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1981?

Elliott: Yes, I did go there for a week to work on the Jacquard loom.

Nathan: How was that?

Elliott: That was very interesting to me. At first, I was terrified, because I thought, "Oh, my God. They think I'm somebody else. Why didn't they pick somebody who thinks in an organized and mechanical way, and who really understands what this loom is doing?"

But in fact, partly what they were doing was trying to get weavers who hadn't ever worked in that way before. Alice Marcoux was the person in charge of this project. Apparently, the students there were not very interested in working on the Jacquard. So she had the idea that if she brought twelve people from around the country to work on the Jacquard, that she would excite students about what was possible with it.

I think it did. I think it worked. Students became very interested. There were problems with the project. It seemed complex, and by the time I entered into it and thought about what was involved and what was possible, a week didn't seem long enough.

Nathan: Just one week.

Elliott: Yes. And suddenly it's over, and you don't have another chance. There's not another Jacquard around. So that part of the problem is you're always still thinking about what could be done if you were working on a Jacquard, but you don't have another possibility. It's this one chance. You don't know how to limit all your ideas. I had thousands of ideas of what was possible. It was a question of figuring out what I would do on my one chance. It didn't turn out as I had hoped it would, but nothing would have. I was really just not sure what I was doing.

Roy came along with me, because he was very interested. He was interested in Babbage and his incredible machine. Roy had taken a weaving class and a class in production weaving and was very interested in what happened with the Jacquard.

He actually was quite helpful, because he could figure out mathematically which of the gears made sense for the technician, Lenny Brodt, to put on to the loom. Lenny wasn't much better at arithmetic than I am. So he had to try things in order to see what would work, even though he was enormously skilled. Roy's ease with math helped a lot.

It was quite interesting. I'd also not ever had the opportunity to have an idea and have somebody realize it in my presence, to actually make it work. I designed at Ford Motor Company, as I told you, but there I never got to see the weaving. The looms were not on the premises. The cloth was woven at different mills, several mills that Ford dealt with. Then the designers or the salesmen or the contact people would come and show what had happened to the design, or we would talk about what changes were possible.

But in the case of the Jacquard loom, you could actually see the progress of the weaving and make adjustments yourself.

Nathan: Oh, I see. The work was already done.

Elliott: The design was all finished, and the warp was already on the loom. I made choices as to how tightly or loosely I wanted the cloth woven and with which yarns. I had finished the design completely before I left Berkeley. A skilled technician at RISD [Rhode Island School of Design] had then punched the cards and mounted them on the loom so it was all ready for me to start weaving. That work became very important to me. I'd brought some yarns with me to use in the weaving. There were almost too many possibilities.

What I felt would have been nice would have been to have all of us there at the same time, and we were not. Each of us was there for one week. We had no contact with anyone except Lenny and the person running the project, Alice Marcoux. I held a seminar with one class and gave a public talk.

I was very interested to see the show of the Jacquard Project later, but that was quite accidental. I saw it in Texas, in Dallas when I went to a weavers' conference, because I hadn't seen the show, though I had seen the catalog.

I would have liked to have somehow had a chance to see how other people dealt with the Jacquard, and what their problems were. Or after I'd woven a piece, to be able to change what I did. I'm not even sure that I knew what that would be. It's a little like what happened with computers when they first came out.

Am I going on too long?

Nathan: No, this is very much to the point.

Elliott: Okay. When computers first were on the market, I'm told it was so expensive to use them that you had to know that your idea was going to work before you began. I don't think it led to very experimental thinking. That was the nice thing about a place like Lawrence Hall of Science where my kids spent many hours growing up. They could pay their quarter and work for an hour on the computer and have a chance to be experimental. Those kids in the computer lab were totally experimental. They didn't want any instruction. The computers were set up in such a way that nobody could apparently hurt them, and the kids couldn't get hurt, and they just played with them.

Well, that would ideally be what you'd like to do with the Jacquard. For me, that week was my one big chance, and that's very hard. Still, I got interested. I photographed a great deal at the Rhode Island School Museum. I photographed historical Jacquard weaving when the loom was hand operated. Those textiles were wonderful, especially some textiles which combined moire with Jacquard patterns at the turn of the century. I was very excited about those. They were so much more beautiful than what any of us did.

I came with an idea of using space-dyed yarns, which not many people were using then. I also brought over-spun yarns.

Nathan: Space-dyed?

Elliott: That was the word I was trying to think of before. It's a yarn where there's a pattern dyed into it. If you turn around, the pink and white yarn there.

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Elliott: That was space-dyed.

Nathan: But that's not dyed for a pattern?

Elliott: It is. It usually is dyed for a pattern.

Nathan: Like kasuri?

Elliott: Yes, right, only when you buy it, it's usually mill-ends, so you don't know what the pattern is.

Nathan: Oh. The mystery yarn.

Elliott: Now, you can buy it and make a sweater, and have the square come out in the middle. But much of the yarn that is on the market is this stuff, mill-ends. So I brought a lot of that yarn. I like it. Much of it turned out to be too weak, because the Jacquard loom creates a lot of tension as the weaving goes on. The yarn kept breaking.

Nathan: Did they have yarns that you could use?

Elliott: Well, I did use some of it. I bought some yarns there that interested me. My experiments with overspun yarn intrigued Alice Marcoux, who was trying to get much the same effect with pattern weaving. She was very excited about the yarn I brought, and she then used some of that yarn to make some pieces on the Jacquard that were extraordinary and very beautiful. So I was pleased that I'd brought it.

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Elliott: I called my Jacquard piece "Ribbons Cascading"; I wanted something that was fluid. I didn't want it to be rigid, with a repeat that was very obvious, and I didn't want it to be something that reminded me of Ford Motor Company. I wanted something quite different. You see, some of the same restrictions were on for both places. At Ford, the repeat was restricted to an inch and a half. That got to be very static for the designers. At RISD I wanted something that was quite different in feel from automotive upholstery.

The repeat at Rhode Island, at least in one direction, was four and a third inches. So it was bigger, but you had to design it very much bigger, and then reduce it. It was a shock to see what it was like when it was reduced and woven.

This whole thing became almost a world of thinking. It became a land of adventure on its own almost apart from the result. I think probably the best experience was going and photographing those exquisite early hand Jacquard textiles in the museum collection, and really becoming aware of what was involved in weaving those cloths. I'd never been aware before of what the problems were in designing for Jacquard. So for that, it was very worthwhile to go.

I hadn't seen those designs done, I hadn't seen the cloth, I hadn't seen the relationship, I hadn't seen a Jacquard loom before. So this was all very unknown; well, I finally simply told myself, "What can happen? It won't work. That's the worst thing that can happen is it won't work, and I will be a great failure, and that will be it, and they will know to pick somebody else another time," because I was so terrified that this would just be such a fiasco.

Well, in fact, I got a lot out of it, and I produced some material that wasn't totally disastrous.

Nathan: What kind of yarn? Was it wool?

Elliott: No, it was, oh, some was synthetic, and some was cotton and linen.

Nathan: And did it have those lines of cards passing along? Punchcards?

Elliott: The Jacquard loom did, yes. I really wanted to do a design that showed that loom. Actually my husband had a picture of a Jacquard cloth of Jacquard himself. There was one picture of

him, and then there was one of the loom, and there was one of them together which was kind of nice.

Nathan: Yes. Quite an adventure, really.

Elliott: Yes, I am very happy to have had that chance.

Nathan: Exactly. Well, that was courageous.

##

Elliott: I just had a couple more things to say about that, actually.

Nathan: Please do.

Elliott: [Phone rings; There's a machine on. It will get it.]

The technician, Lenny, was enormously skilled, but there was the sensation that there was a tradition and that you weren't necessarily following in it. That was maybe good, and maybe bad.

[Now responding to phone] Just have to see if that's my family. My mother's not feeling well. Excuse me.

Nathan: Let me just turn it off [tape turned off].

[Tape resumes] Somehow the tradition was not being followed?

Elliott: Well, yes, in that you really were working within something that had a strong tradition. It's almost like working with lace. In fact, in textiles, there is a strong tradition which is an advantage and a disadvantage. You want to be doing something that's individual and that's new and that is a direction you've not seen before, but at the same time, if you know anything at all about textile history, you know an awful lot has already been done.

That's fine, you know. But standing there with someone else who works as a technician at a factory today--and with the buildings in Rhode Island, in Providence anyway, all looking like factories, and they all are built that way--you're aware that you're working within a very limited area.

You don't know how much anybody else who's part of the tradition wants to help adjust the process so that you can try your ideas. I'm not sure that I mind if a lot of threads are on the surface, and yet it's very hard to try that with that someone who's used to it in another way.

Nathan: Yes. There's a compromise even before you start?

Elliott: Sort of.

Nathan: How long a length were you producing? What were the dimensions?

Elliott: Oh, you could get three yards in. We tested. We tried the cards in a particular way to see if they would work. Then we would try different yarns to see which of those yarns worked. It took a long time. You thought that it was going to be fast, because the loom was going fast. But in the end, you felt that it was too slow.

Now I know it's an old loom, it's an old Jacquard and it was necessary to stop it often to try different yarns or settings, but somehow it might as well really have been mechanical and produced ten yards at a stop. Fast. So you could tell what you had.

I like the idea of having a length of cloth in which the quantity itself adds to the interest of the cloth. It's not just seeing a limited sample; there's a whole piece.

But you know, it just didn't all come together. That's okay. Rarely has one week in my life been totally glorious, so that everything has worked. It was wonderful that it was a new experience.

Nathan: Sure. Did you have any feeling of New England vs. California? I don't know if I'm reading something into what I think I see, that sometimes California is considered not totally sane.

Elliott: Yes, well I think that you feel a strong New England tradition, in general in textiles. At RISD, I was aware that there was a lot of emphasis on working for industry. Not that students were necessarily going to be getting jobs in New York designing for the textile industry though many hoped to do that.

A lot of them wanted to buy old small mills and do limited production of particular items that they would put on the market. There was much more emphasis on that kind of thing than there ever was here. No one here does that.

Nathan: Interesting.

Elliott: At RISD, they would often have people come from the textile industry in New York to give talks there. They were much more aware of the whole huge textile industry and its history. That was the emphasis in terms of students' thinking, and that was acceptable, that was desirable to them.

And now that was a while ago, and I haven't been back in Rhode Island since then.

Nathan: What do students here tend to think?

Elliott: They would like to just do their own work, or some have thought they wanted to teach. I'm not even sure. It's such a varied field. There was such a mixed crew in terms of age and thinking, but few of them wanted to go and work in industry. They might want to silkscreen and do something in production in that. But most of them wanted to do their own work if they had their choice, whereas that was not the case so much at Providence.

Nathan: Would this suggest something that one has wondered about, evaluating exhibits submitted for a show. If you were being the jury person for a show in New England, would you have different criteria than if you were a jury person for a show in California?

Elliott: Probably. But I think that those criteria would be my own individual ones. If I were asked for expressive work within a certain area, or if I were asked about something that was to be going into production, I mean, if I knew that the purpose was a part of the thinking, I would consider that. Most shows are not for production textiles, though occasionally there will be a show in a place like Cooper Hewitt, like "Textiles by the Yard," and then they'll have printed textiles that are done in production.

But most of the time, what we run into is textiles as self-expression. I think I bring to it whatever my background is, just as a juror from New England would bring his or her notions of what is adventurous or acceptable or beautiful.

Nathan: So, do I gather that utility is not something that governs your own views?

Elliott: No, it never is a concern of mine in my own textiles.

Nathan: It was interesting when you spoke of what your image might be of the product when you were working on the Jacquard, and then how it felt to see it. I think a little earlier, you mentioned that in Sweden, the artists work closely with the mills. Did I understand that correctly?

Elliott: Yes. I didn't see the mills in Sweden. Many artists designed for the mills. I don't know how they worked with them. I know that they worked very closely with the workshops that wove their tapestries. But that's a very different thing.

The artist would come to look at the work once a week at least, and try to talk about it with the weaver.

Nathan: Would this be doing a tapestry by hand from a cartoon?

Elliott: Yes. Right. So it's quite different. I know that a lot of designers in Sweden designed things for the mills, but I don't know how often the designers worked there, or if they just sold the design, or how often the design was actually woven in India for real production.

Nathan: That's interesting. Your experience obviously has been more than just in the Bay Area. I was thinking of Hawaii, Sweden, Canada, Japan, India, and China.

Elliott: I haven't been in all of those countries.

Nathan: No. These were simply examples that you gave of your interests. But I guess you would have been in Canada, in Banff, Nova Scotia, Vancouver; in Hawaii and in Sweden?

Sweden, 1985, and Art in Public Places

Elliott: Right. Yes, that's right.

Nathan: These travels, and sometimes even living in the places, what did that mean to you and your art?

Elliott: Well for Sweden, when that happened, it was in 1985. There had been some problems in my family, and this was a chance to go away and think about work, and to be in a different situation where I could really just think about that, I mean I wasn't doing any artwork while I was there, and I was there for four months.

It was the first time in my life, practically, when I wasn't doing artwork, but I was thinking about it. It was also very nice to have an expression of confidence in me that I had gotten from S.W.E.A., the Swedish Women's Educational Association.

I had gone to Europe in 1952 and hadn't been anywhere since, hadn't travelled anywhere at all since then (except for the U.S. and Canada). I had almost given up hope that I'd ever get anywhere. But it was very wonderful for me to be at some distance and be able to look at my work and at other people's work, and think about what I wanted to do.

You know I was grateful for the experience. I don't know how it affected my work. I don't see a conscious change in what happened, but I know that it was very important for me. In all of those places in Canada, in Nova Scotia, Banff, and Calgary, I worked teaching or lecturing. I taught for a month at the Nova

Scotia College of Art and Design under a Canada Arts Council grant.

Somehow when I went to Sweden, I wasn't called upon to perform, or to teach, or to reel off something which mattered to me. I was able to take in what was there in a different way.

Nathan: Were you asked to do research there for S.W.E.A. in Sweden?

Elliott: No. No, S.W.E.A. had only a few requirements. I made a proposal to compare art in public places in Sweden with art in public places in this country. I submitted tapestries, rather than baskets at that time, and was very pleased to have a warm response. People were terribly interested in my work.

I went and looked at the Office of Public Art in Stockholm. I thought I was going to look through all kinds of things, sculpture as well as textiles. There was such an extensive file, that it wasn't really possible to do that. So I focused on the textiles. I did go to see some, I did look at some sculpture, and I talked with the woman who was in charge of that office and spent quite a lot of time with her. Then I went to all the places I could where people were doing textiles.

It was very wonderful, and they were very gracious and generous, and I made some contacts on a personal level that mattered a great deal to me. I met all the people that I decided I wanted to meet (almost anyway). I made out a list of people after looking through the files of work in the Office of Public Art, those people whose work I wanted to see personally, and people I hoped to meet on the basis of what I'd heard about them. I did, in fact, go and meet them.

I gave a talk in Gothenburg at the museum there about my work and about American textiles. I gave one other talk to another group of textile artists in Stockholm, but in general, I was really not doing that. I was simply meeting people and seeing work and thinking. It was also a vacation, since I almost never have had one. The kind of teaching that I've been doing is the kind that goes on in the summer as well as the winter. So it was very nice to not be working.

Art Scene in Sweden

Nathan: A chance to expand a little. When you speak of art in public places, does this mean government purchase?

Elliott: Not necessarily. In Sweden it does, because there is no private body that is able to buy art, because of the tax system. They're very aware of that. Sometimes tourists buy work; and also the church. The church is a large patron in Sweden, which is a problem for some people, not many, but for a few people in Sweden that I've met, because they don't want to do "religious art."

Largely it's the government that is the supporting body. Artists are also on the committees that decide what work is bought. It's complicated and interesting and very different. The country is so small that you feel that everybody has a strong input into what goes on. People are not necessarily wonderful artists, and yet they are able to work as artists. Almost none of them teach, for instance.

Nathan: The government supports the artists?

Elliott: By buying their work, yes.

Nathan: Did you have the sense that the artists in the field pretty much all know each other nationwide?

Elliott: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I even knew them all.

Nathan: That's marvelous.

Elliott: It was very interesting. What I would like to do next time, if I went again, would be to go to an area where the commercial textiles are made; the mills and a school nearby that's kind of a trade school to see what happens there. I didn't get to do that. That was quite far from where I stayed.

Nathan: It is interesting what you have to say about a restrictive market, in a sense. Does that have an influence on what is produced? You mentioned the church.

Elliott: It does have an influence. It does. It means that on the whole the work is not quite as adventurous or "crazy." Sometimes I think things would be more interesting there if it wasn't government patronage that supports the artists.

Though I must say, I found more variation than I expected. Sweden is not a country I would have chosen for an extended stay, but I was awarded a travel grant to go to Sweden, and in fact, it turned out to be wonderful. Wonderful. I was very touched by it, and I found some artists there who were really very strong individuals. They were people of very strong will, and I was encouraged to see that they pop up everywhere.

Because it's such a small country, no one is very critical of anyone else's work. You know that it's too close. Nobody will ever be critical, and if anybody is, then there's an enormous uproar. Part of the problem I think in the field today here, is that there isn't much serious criticism. There isn't much serious writing about, certainly there's not much beautiful writing, but there's not much serious writing that really talks about the ideas involved in textiles, or connections in history, or what it does in terms of general theories of art. I don't care about the theories. Just some serious thinking and talking about what all of us are doing; a context within which to see our work.

Maybe it doesn't happen in the field because it's small. The field isn't small, but the numbers of really serious people, maybe, is small. People are uncomfortable doing it just as they are in Sweden. Being critical could mean raising questions, discussing ideas.

Nathan: Right. I was wondering whether in the work in Sweden, you could detect influences from other cultures. There is the King of Sweden and his Chinese jade collection. Were you aware of what the influences might be?

Elliott: I was interested. I was in Sweden with Pat Hickman for part of the time. She just came for a week. We went to see a Turkish tent that had been captured in a battle in Poland when Sweden was a conquering force.

Nathan: Yes.

Elliott: They're wonderful collections. We went to the Army Museum, a strange place to go, to see things. We went to see this wonderful silk tent, and I photographed it later.

Nathan: It goes way back to the time of Peter the Great, doesn't it?

Elliott: Yes. But I don't think anybody else had ever looked at it besides the curator. It was being repaired.

Things were always being repaired, and were not available to see. The Viking things were enormously vital and exciting.

Those were really thrilling. There were also lots of other things. I think the Swedes were embarrassed by something like a war trophy. I was also interested in the early calico printing that had been produced in Sweden.

It was fascinating when I gave my talk in Gothenburg. I said, you know, I had always thought that it would be fun to go to Scandinavia because I've been so excited about cardweaving. When I learned cardweaving, I knew that there was a great deal of cardweaving done in Sweden and in the other Scandinavian countries. Well, it turned out, of course, nobody in Sweden does any cardweaving. I was the only person there who had ever done it after a sample in school, in that whole big audience.

Nathan: How interesting.

Elliott: It was fascinating. Sweden is very insular as well, and people knew about what they were supposed to know about. They knew something about Swedish history in textiles, but they didn't know, there wasn't a great deal of interest or excitement or knowledge about other textiles. There was one man in Gothenburg who had done a lot of traveling. He was quite an unusual weaver. He was interested in tapa cloth. But I think he was the only person there who had heard of tapa cloth.

I did find one young woman in Sweden who was doing card-weaving, and I went to visit her. Her name is Lillevi Hultman. Her work was very experimental and I was very excited about it.

So there were a few people like that, but not many. Some felt that Sweden was small and insular, and wanted to travel so that they could see other things. Then they were all excited about Navajo weaving. They can't understand why all Americans don't just jump up and down about Navajo weaving, because they think it's really wonderful.

Obviously, Navajo weaving does have tight restrictions, just as Swedish weaving does. That is, there are rules, and it's easy to know when it's good and when it isn't. I think that may be one of the reasons the Swedish weavers love it.

Nathan: I gather you do not jump up and down about it?

Elliott: No. I think Navajo weaving is sound, and sometimes the colors are very beautiful. Some of the rugs, for instance, the wedge weaves, I think those are very beautiful. I'm probably down on Navajo weaving because so many beginning weavers write papers on Navajo rugs.

It seems to me Navajo weaving does everything very much the hard way, and the rather unimaginative way. It's beautiful. It's just silly for me to be a Navajo weaver, and it's even sillier for Swedes. They thought Americans were crazy, I mean in the sense of their weaving; they feel that Americans will take a chance on anything. They'll weave anything.

Swedes feel that it's because they don't have the money to do that, but I don't think that that's the case. They generally don't weave large things unless they have a commission. Most of them earn a living at what they do, at weaving.

Nathan: I see.

Elliott: Or at printing, or whatever it is that they are doing in textiles.

Nathan: Do they do anything like wearable art, or...

Elliott: Oh, yes. Some of them do, yes. I did get to Finland briefly, to Helsinki, and that was very exciting.

Nathan: Yes. Did you see the Finnish work?

Elliott: I saw some. I was invited to participate in a textile conference there. But you know, nobody speaks Finnish who isn't Finnish. I don't speak Finnish, and I felt it to be a very frustrating experience. I haven't travelled enough to accept the fact that I can't speak the local language. I'm always sort of thinking if I concentrate harder, I'll understand it. But of course that doesn't work. They translated my talk into Finnish, because there were a few people, just really a few, who couldn't speak English or didn't understand English. But they didn't translate the rest of the proceedings for me into English. That was very difficult for me.

So I looked at slides, and that was exciting, but it would have been nice for me to understand.

Nathan: Right. It would have been interesting.

Ethnographic Materials in Hawaii

Nathan: When you were in Hawaii, were you aware of other influences?

Elliott: On people's work there?

Nathan: Right.

Elliott: There's a lot of influence of early Hawaiian feather work and early oceanic textiles.

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Elliott: I think everything does influence everything else. It's just that I'm not sure everybody thinks that. It depends. What happened at the University was that I was teaching as part of a "Women in Art" program. I was guest artist for a month in 1987.

Nathan: This was in Hawaii?

Elliott: Yes, at the University of Hawaii. The department hadn't had a consistent textile instructor for some time. Their department had changed. The woman had died who taught there, and they hadn't been able to find a replacement, so there wasn't much continuity.

Nathan: I guess I was wondering again about the influence of Asian art.

Elliott: Well, you feel a great interest in this. There's a big East-West Center on the campus, and people feel it in terms of esthetics, but I didn't see it in terms of how it came out in the work. I saw very little exciting or wonderful sculpture and painting in Hawaii. I just didn't see very much art in general there that I found very moving, except the ethnographic materials at the museums, which I thought were thrilling.

Nathan: Would you include basketry in this?

Elliott: I'm not sure what you mean?

Nathan: I mean of what was not particularly thrilling.

Elliott: The contemporary stuff that's being made there I didn't feel was first rate. I would like it to be, but it wasn't.

Nathan: One wonders what the ideal combination would be to produce a lot of first rate art. The teachers don't have to worry about eating, because they have their jobs. So...

Elliott: A lot depends on just particular individuals, and I think a lot depends on the teachers or the strong influences in the area. I think the more good people there are around who are interesting and who are making artwork, the more people influence one another.

Nathan: So it is the critical mass of creative people?

Elliott: Right. Sure.

Nathan: I was wondering how one was going to manage this.

Elliott: I don't think you can set it up that way. I think that maybe Ed Rossbach began to do that when we had the Design Department at Cal. Something was happening like that. I don't think that that's particularly the case at the moment, but I think it was certainly the case then.

In Hawaii, people seemed to not work very hard at anything, and they settled for rather less than excellent work. There was some work that was interesting. I juried a show there last year, a fiber show, and some of the work was interesting, but there wasn't anything exceptional. You know, you'd think that maybe a geographical area would influence something so that you would have a response. I think maybe the most beautiful thing I saw in Hawaii was some hand-made Samoan rope. It was beautiful.

What I saw that people made, that they felt was influenced by the natural materials or by the Hawaiian history, was just not really wonderful. Or the feather work that was supposedly influencing things; it just felt like a rip-off. I couldn't see any kind of really deep understanding of what the message was behind the feather work; the ethnographic material, itself, was thrilling.

Basketry Conference in Harrison Hot Springs, B.C.

Nathan: I wasn't sure that we had given you a chance to talk about Canada; I know that the different cities are different, and I don't mean to lump everything together. What sort of experiences did you have there?

Elliott: I had a wonderful experience in Harrison Hot Springs at a basketry workshop a couple of years ago. That was completely because of the woman who organized it. It was during the Expo. This woman was crazy about baskets. She lives an hour and a half north of Vancouver, and she mobilized her whole city.

To have a basketry conference, she got four European basketmakers to come; she paid their way; and she got Pat and me to come, and paid us while we were there. We were the only non-European, non-traditional people who were there.

The others were making Swiss backpacks or French strawberry baskets, or English shopping baskets. They were very fine, and people were very excited. Those people who wanted to could do that, and Pat and I taught a workshop on experimental basketry.

Nathan: Did anybody come?

Elliott: Yes. Yes. It was very interesting. The most interesting thing was the fact that we really did have contact in the end. We talked. When Pat and I were supposed to present our work and talk about it, instead of doing that for the whole time, we really asked that the other basketmakers come and join us in talking about the work, after we had presented some of our own.

They really had not understood what we were doing, because there were no rules governing our work. I think we had a really exciting exchange. It was largely because this woman had set it up in such a way that made it possible.

Nathan: What was her name?

Elliott: Mary Grieshaber.

Nathan: Such an interesting person should be mentioned by name.

Elliott: Absolutely. She was just astounding. I can't even imagine that she could do all that. She and her husband, Otto, had lived in this country, the US. I think they had five or six children, and he retired. I don't know what his job had been, and they moved to Canada and started a farm.

Her son had just graduated in something like genetics, but he was going into politics in Canada. They really believe in affecting the life around them. She is now on a one-woman rampage to keep the rural post offices open. In Canada, they were going to close them. She is organizing an opposition to that; and if anybody can do it, she will. She's just an amazing lady.

She's interested in baskets, and so she grows willow for baskets. She's just amazing. She has a daughter who is a music teacher in Washington State. She gave her daughter a birthday present, which was to pay for her fee to our workshop. She has another daughter who's a veterinarian. Most of her children came back to help her on this basketry conference. She found accommodations for all of us. She was just remarkable. That was quite amazing, to see what one person could do who really worked hard at something and believed in it. She got some funds from Expo to be able to do this. It was wonderful.

I was at Banff. I found the area very beautiful, but it was so undirected. I was just there for a short time, at the beginning of a term. People were trying to find out who would be their friends at the school. It was not a good time to be there to talk about work.

And anyway, I really believe in continuity, and at Banff everything felt scattered and separate, with people coming and going. I think it's fine to have visiting people, I like that; I think that lots of good ideas can be generated, but there needs to be some regular, continuing instructor holding it together.

I think on the whole, you need to have some kind of continuity where students have a sense of what kind of program they're in. So that going around to different places is interesting, but I don't think it really constitutes a program for students.

At Banff when I was there, the program itself was not a very strong one in textiles. Not a very directed one. Their program was in flux then.

I've been in Toronto. I was much impressed with the Royal Ontario Museum, where I spent some time. I will be going to a basketry conference in September in Toronto, and I'll know more about Toronto.

I know that Canadians are supposed to be very reserved, but they've always been extremely welcoming for me. One year, I had worked more in Canada than I did in the US. I think that is kind of amazing.

Nathan: Yes. Eventually, I would like to go back to the conference that Mary Grieshaber organized. You mentioned that you and Pat were leading these discussions. Did you bring examples of your work to show?

Elliott: No. We showed slides.

Nathan: I see.

Elliott: But we weren't leading. I mean everybody did one of the programs, and then we did one. In ours, we invited people to join in the discussion, because we felt that people really didn't understand what we were doing. Our students did, but the other instructors didn't.

Nathan: Were you already using the membrane around the element?

Elliott: Yes, Pat was. But we also did something else. One of the students had done some things with paper and evaporated milk, or evaporated milk and water.

Nathan: Really?

Elliott: That worked quite well.

Nathan: What happens to it?

Elliott: It just gets hard. It gets quite hard. You can also do just glue, diluted glue and water, and that will work fine.

Nathan: Let's see. Were there any other travels that you [answering machine comes on in background]

Elliott: That's my phone.

You know it's so strange. Somehow it seems very odd to me to be doing an oral history at a time when both of my parents are really dying. Just the situation itself is somehow strange.

Significance of Immigrants' Experience

Nathan: Yes. Do you want to say anything about your parents?

Elliott: Somehow more recently I've been going through suitcases full of old photographs. I was back in Detroit for a week. I don't think I had quite realized what an enormous influence it was on me to be the first generation in America, to have had parents who were immigrants. At various periods, I don't think it was particularly comfortable. I think my parents were always worried that it wouldn't be comfortable for us. It is automatically a kind of driving force that makes you aware of things, and causes you to see the world around you in a different way.

Last week there was a program at the De Young Museum called "The Language of Textiles" in which they showed the film "Hearts and Hands." Pat Hickman gave a talk. She mentioned the immigrant as part of the thinking about textiles in this country because "Hearts and Hands" deals with the minorities in this country in the sense of Native Americans, and Blacks who were slaves. There are various influences of the pioneers going across the plains and all, but usually nothing about the people who were coming from outside this country.

Nathan: I was wondering about whether the Vietnamese and Mexicans were included in the film?

Elliott: No, there wasn't anything about that really in this program. Pat talked a little about it in terms of things that were Victorian. She mentioned immigrants and talked about the Victorian woman and what she did, and what was acceptable for her to do.

But I realized that each of us carries our own private memory of those things that we're raised with, and the image that we have of what is worthwhile doing, and of how appropriate it is for us to do that. I just was aware that that has been more of an influence on me than I ever thought, or knew, especially the idea that one was supposed to achieve.

Nathan: The work ethic; to work hard?

Elliott: Oh, yes. I think my father was always very willing, very willing to pay taxes in a country in which he felt he could vote, and in which he felt he could express his opinion. Whereas when he lived in Russia, he never was able to do that. He always felt in Russia there was taxation, but no representation.

And what constitutes success? Though my ideas are not at all consistent, I think, with my parents'; I think when my mother asks how I am, she always asks, "Are you working?" She doesn't mean am I doing artwork. She means really do I have a job, because that's really a part of not only living, not even only a question of money; it's not a question of whether or not one is making enough money to live, but that certainly was always a struggle for my parents.

It's just a very strange time for me to be confronted with the idea that they are both in this situation simultaneously. It's a very sad situation, because they are no longer able to control their lives and what they want to do. I'm grateful that I have a brother and sister who live closer to them, and they're able to do more in terms of taking care of my parents. My sister Evelyn Cowen is several years older than I, and my brother, David is fourteen years younger. But I'm also considerably more of a rebel, so that that's why I'm not there.

Nathan: Of course. You might think of having a family picture. We will have pictures, certainly, but some pictures of the family, of a personal nature, are perfectly appropriate.

Elliott: Ah, that's interesting, actually. You know, my son, Aaron, who is very visual, was looking through these photographs, and he was very excited about them. My older son, Jeremy, is the computer buff. I think partly he almost couldn't stand the heavy

sentiment, and so withdrew. He also didn't want to be immersed in old photographs.

We found a photograph of my parents dressed up in a rather odd way. My mother was wearing men's clothes, and she looked very cute. Aaron asked, "Gee, do you think that was the fashion at the time?" I said, "I imagine so." We asked my mother later, and she said, "Oh, it was a Hallowe'en party we were going to."

I realized it's so easy to misunderstand totally. It's a rewriting of history. Fortunately, we were able to ask her. Isn't that funny?

Nathan: Yes, yes it is.

Elliott: She said, "Oh, I was wearing knickers. It was a joke."

Nathan: You know there is a continuity. It is in some ways helpful to be aware that this thread connects.

Elliott: Yes.

Impressive Items in Résumé

Nathan: Well, let's see. I hoped that we could talk about some of the exhibits and awards that have been most significant to you. Do you want to pull one out of the hat, and then I can ask about others?

Elliott: Well, I want to say that I think it's very funny that people are always very impressed by the things that I really don't care at all about. It strikes me always as being funny, the fact that I worked at styling at Ford Motor Company, which really was a very limiting experience in many ways. There were such tight limitations that you longed to be outside of it so you could do what you knew would be better.

But that somehow seems impressive to people when they look at my résumé, and the fact that I went to Cranbrook, which so many people seem to think is really important. "Oh," they say, "I wish I could have gone there." I went there because it was close by, and I could live at home, and it was the easy place to go to. I didn't want to go to the same place I'd gotten my Bachelor's degree from. Cranbrook had this great reputation, but it wasn't a good place for me. It didn't work at all. I met some people I liked that I still know. I suppose there are no graduate schools that everybody is delighted with, you know?

Recently I was on the graduate committee of a student that I had taught when I was at Arts and Crafts a couple of years ago. Just the other day I saw what she was doing for her M.F.A. She's now finishing.

Also I went to Mills College because I'd had a student who is now a painting major there and graduating from Mills. Since I taught at San Francisco State last year, I went to see the M.F.A. shows this year. Then I realized that things have changed very much. Whether I'm just not used to seeing graduate student work, or whether the emphasis has changed, much of it doesn't speak to me at all.

I don't know if this is because I'm not teaching right now. None of the people I saw were happy with their graduate departments. It's not just those places. I think that it's hard to find a situation where people are absolutely delighted with what they're doing, and so I know that no job is perfect, and no graduate school is perfect.

But all of these things that I have in my résumé that are always the ones that elicit some remark about how wonderful they are, those are not the ones that mattered very much to me. And that's it. It just interests me. I wonder what would matter to me on a résumé. What would I like? I don't really even know what that would be.

Graduate School vs. the Atelier

Nathan: Well, that is something we might play with a little bit later. But when you were speaking of artists who are not satisfied with the graduate school experience, maybe graduate school isn't what artists need? I don't know.

Elliott: Oh, I think it is. I don't think that there are very many graduate students who are happy in any field. I don't think it's art. I just think it's graduate. I think it's that period in life, or maybe this period at this moment at graduate school.

Nathan: I was wondering about what I think of as the atelier system, in which you work with an artist who means something to you. Does that work for you?

Elliott: At one time I thought that might be good. I don't think so now. I think it's much, much more sound educationally to work with an instructor, or a number of instructors who have different

approaches. Then you can choose within them. You have a possibility of trying them.

In the atelier, the instructor or the master artist only believes in one way of working, most of the time. Then that student goes off having found the Holy Grail. I think it limits instead of enlarges one's horizon. Everybody thought it was so wonderful to work for Ford, and yet you had an inch and a half repeat in every direction. You dreamt in that repeat. You had so many restrictions, and there are restrictions on production. But in school, there aren't those restrictions, and it's the time to try all of those different possibilities.

Teaching, Excitement, and Exploration

Elliott: I suppose in a really fantastic work situation, you might not have all those restrictions. You'd still have more than you'd have in a school where you have instructors who have some breadth. By that I mean that you're teaching, not that you're saying, "Do anything you want." That's not teaching. But where a teacher is, in fact, provoking a certain kind of excitement about something, and expecting serious consideration of different ideas, and the exchange between the people, instead of being competitive, is helpful so that people have a chance to try out the things that they feel they want to try without the bitterness that sometimes happens.

Nathan: Is it possible beyond this very eloquent statement, to say what it is that you want to convey to your students, or that you want to have happen between yourself and your students?

Elliott: I'm not sure what I want with that. I would rather have the student be thinking about what that student wants to happen in his or her work. It's usually a woman these days, so in her work. I'd like it to be that I can convey my excitement about the field, so that the student can then try those things that she wants to try. I can be there to help her try those, or present ideas that might make her try things that she was not aware of before.

I don't care particularly whether she knows that I have suggested it, but I would like her to get a chance to explore something before she makes it all slick and smooth and elegantly finished on the surface. As I've said, I went to a technical high school, and we were all so glib in the way in which we presented work. Not talk so much, but the work itself was slick, and it was very accomplished, but it wasn't mature.

I think I would much rather cut off all the gloss and have people be willing to subject themselves and be vulnerable and try different things, and have them not work if they don't work. It presents the situation where they're safe enough to try anything and have it work. Not have it work, but have the possibility of trying it without being discouraged from doing that.

Nathan: They would not have to justify to you why they felt this was the way?

Elliott: I would be willing to have them justify it, because it might clarify their thinking. But I don't think it has to be an adversary situation. I just think that I would like a situation that's open, that they feel comfortable in, and where I feel comfortable, because sometimes you have one and not the other. It's usually that the instructor feels comfortable and the students don't. I think it's possible for both to be comfortable, and for the instructor to help the student do those things that matter to her.

Nathan: So it's the student's vision, not the instructor's vision?

Elliott: Well the instructor's vision is to enlarge upon possibilities, and to give some sort of feeling of what is, in fact, possible to do. I'm not limiting it; there should be some instruction to help the student do it, and some appreciation of what has been done before.

One of the things that was wrong with Cranbrook was that everybody thought that it was only yesterday that textiles were discovered, and that they came in on Day One. And not even only textiles, but art altogether.

Sources of Criticism

Nathan: That suggests that you deal with each student separately?

Elliott: Yes. I have done things where students work together, do a critique class or something, but I don't like that as a general thing. Sometimes that's fine, but you sometimes have students who can't do that.

Nathan: As a mature artist, do you turn to someone else for criticism, or is this something you do of your own work? Do you criticize your own work?

Elliott: I think I criticize my own work.

Nathan: But there's a point at which you no longer need the instructor?

Elliott: No, but I think I'd enjoy the critic.

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Nathan: You were speaking of critics.

Elliott: Yes. We have only one person doing the textile reviews currently, and I think we need more than one idea of criticism, too.

I went to hear somebody speak this last week-end on textiles in Indonesia at the DeYoung, and it was a very interesting talk. But I was aware that when the speaker talked about the "simple processes," that she could never have sat down at a loom to know what was involved. What she was describing was extraordinarily sophisticated, but she just didn't know that.

Anyway, I think it would be nice if there could be some real discussion in print so that there could be insight that would help in terms of looking at things. When I visit places today like Cranbrook, where everybody has an individual studio, as I described earlier, the whole idea is to have this separate space, a whole little cubbyhole of your own, and all your privacy. But I think in a school, something is gained from being there, and from being aware of other people and what they're doing, so that you don't have to try all of it yourself, and you know what would happen if such and such happened.

Nathan: To be sure I understand it: the instructor hopes to open options for the student, but then the mature artist would really benefit from consistent, informed criticism?

Elliott: Yes, and other people around, I think. I don't even know what form any of this would take. I enjoy talking with a few friends about the work. I think, though, that there's not much of that that goes on, and students more and more, I feel, don't want it at an earlier level.

Nathan: I see.

Elliott: But I think the instructor's job is to provide an open space where ideas can be discussed, things can be tried, techniques, materials, whatever, but mostly some kind of set up where it's possible to do many different responses to a single problem, so that the students benefit from seeing different responses.

"Living Treasure" Award and Show (1985)

Nathan: Well I was wondering, too, for example, whether you were impressed--I don't know if "impressed" is the right word. Were you gratified by being called a "Living Treasure" in 1985?

Elliott: It's a strange thing, because I think that would be very nice if in fact, that was a general title, or that people knew. I think it's a first step towards some kind of awareness that working in crafts is an important area of art.

I'm not sure what it meant to be a "Living Treasure" of California. I think the idea's a very appealing one. I think that if in fact there was anybody besides me who had ever heard of it before, it would mean something. In Japan it means something, because it's publicized, and it is a whole tradition now.

I had hoped that maybe that would be a first step toward setting up such a tradition, but it doesn't seem to have happened.

It was to acknowledge the anniversary of that museum, the hundredth anniversary of the Crocker Museum in Sacramento. One of their committees decided to do this. It was a very worthwhile thing to do. I was very pleased at it. I liked the show. I was very pleased to have a group of my work shown, and the thinking that went on in terms of figuring out which pieces I wanted to have in that show. That was nice.

But I don't know what it is, in fact. Will they give any more awards? Will it be something that they do every five years? Every ten years? Every hundred years? You know, what is it?

Nathan: Of course the "Living Treasures" in Japan are honored because they're doing things the ancient way, but you were not going to do things the ancient way because you're a "Living Treasure."

Elliott: Well, by the time they give them in Japan, they usually are eighty-five years old.

Nathan: Yes, but they're not innovators.

Elliott: No. You're quite right. None of these people at the Crocker Museum, none of them, were people who did things in the traditional way. So in that sense, it was nice being

acknowledged. That part was nice. And the show was beautifully installed.

Did you happen to see that exhibit?

Nathan: I didn't, but you gave me a catalog, I think, so I could see the things.

Elliott: Yes. They did an extraordinary job on the installation. I was pleased. For instance, the tapestry that I did for the Social Services Building is always seen in the dark. It's not lit properly, and it's hung too high.

At the Crocker Museum, they hung it beautifully. And I thought, "Oh, it really is okay. I did really do a good job on that." That was worth the whole thing, in order to see that in fact, it was really a good tapestry.

In my house there wasn't enough space to see it. In the lobby where it's supposed to go, the architect was concerned because people touched it, which I took as a great compliment, but he was very worried about that. It will take a long time before the touching will wear it out, but he couldn't stand that. So they kept lifting it higher and higher to the ceiling. So now it's way up at the ceiling. I designed it with the idea that people would see themselves as though they were part of a crowd, part of the tapestry. It was to be seen at eye level.

So seeing it at the Crocker, I thought, "Okay, that's fine."

Nathan: How long is that tapestry?

Elliott: Almost fourteen feet. And it's four feet high. So, you know, you need a big space. It was very nice to see. They hung it very well. That part was nice, yes.

Nathan: Exactly. I might just toss a couple of things out and see what you'd like to talk about.

Graphic Design

Elliott: Actually, I have one thing that I just finished doing. This was just published. It's a book of poetry that I did the cover for. It's *The Window* by Dahlia Ravikovitch. She's an Israeli poet.

Nathan: Isn't that lovely.

Elliott: I was very interested in trying this idea. I think she's a very good poet. I knew one of the translators, Chana Bloch, who teaches at Mills. I did a cover for a book of poetry she had done.

Nathan: Can you make designs for covers?

Elliott: Right. And I like that. I like doing graphics.

Nathan: I have seen some of the fliers and announcements for shows that you have done, and found them very interesting. But I didn't know you were doing it. Well, you probably never entirely gave up the graphics.

Elliott: I've never given up anything. I suppose that's the problem.

Nathan: Maybe that's one reason why those netting layers appealed to you, because everything's still there.

Elliott: Right. It is one of the reasons.

Nathan: Well that's exciting. Do you imagine that you will do more graphic design like this?

Elliott: Oh, I hope so. I hope so. I've done three.

Nathan: Three book covers?

Elliott: Three or four book covers.

Nathan: For small presses, for special things?

Elliott: Yes, right. It's very interesting to me to think in that way. It's like I did one Jacquard piece, and I would love to do a lot of them. Sure. And I'd like to try very different ones.

Nathan: Exactly. You do this in totally another topic. These are not books about fiber art. These are simply in another realm.

Elliott: Right.

Nathan: Oh, that's marvelous. You are gutsy.

Elliott: You take your heart in your hands and try.

Nathan: So for your own shows and shows in which you appear, do you from time to time do the fliers?

Elliott: I try to. For the book that was in honor of Anne Blinks, *In Celebration of the Curious Mind*, I did the cover.

I usually do the announcements of my own shows. I like doing that. That part's fun.

Nathan: And are there other things that one thinks of as being somewhat far afield from your basic interest that you also like to do?

Elliott: Well, I've done some jewelry, but I don't think I'm particularly good at it. I don't think my gift is in that direction.

Nathan: I'm looking at this handsome bust, the sculpture of course.

Elliott: Yes. It was wonderful to do sculpture again. I hadn't done that for a long time.

Nathan: You think you might do more?

Elliott: Well, I was so interested when I was doing it, that I think so. I'm not sure. I haven't done anything more with it, but I think that's partly because it ends up looking very much like my mother. At the moment, that's kind of hard to move with right now.

Nathan: It is specific, not an abstract image of woman. It's a very individual, lovely thing.

Some Awards and their Meaning

Nathan: I might ask you about the Tiffany Grant, way back in '64, which I think you had mentioned before. Was that particularly gratifying?

Elliott: That was wonderful, yes. It was unexpected. I applied and I sent the materials, and then suddenly I got an award and a check. The whole thing was done quite nicely. I didn't know many people here. Suddenly I got that award.

Nathan: Now was this basketry, or...?

Elliott: No, it was weaving. It was a tapestry. Not only tapestry, but weaving. It was at a time when I really could use the grant, and the grant meant a great deal to me.

Nathan: I wondered also about the somewhat later '69 Purchase Award for Tapestry for the San Francisco Arts Festival.

Elliott: I thought it was a good tapestry, and it was nice that it got an award.

Nathan: And then the Detroit Institute of Arts Foundation Society Purchase Award, a wall hanging. Was that...

Elliott: Yes, the "Campaign Promises?"

Nathan: I think that was "Campaign Promises."

Elliott: '69? Yes. That was sort of "local girl makes good." It was okay, because I had done that. I wove the piece in response to the '68 Democratic Convention in Chicago. I was listening to the radio while I was working on this tapestry, and I had just started it. It was silk, a red and blue and white tapestry. Just happened to be blue and red, and I was working on it.

And as I listened to the news, it was so horrifying, I went and tore up sheets, and used them as part of it. The tapestry was really like what you see at the conventions where there are things that go up in the air. I was surprised that I would get an award on something that was political and that wasn't "nice."

Nathan: That is interesting, that it could be accepted that way. There was a '75-'76 National Endowment for the Arts grant in visual arts. What did that award mean to you?

Elliott: That was wonderful. It meant that I could work on one of my large nets and finish it. I also finished a tapestry at that time that I had been working on for a long time. I'd been teaching a lot, and there wasn't much time to work. So I took time off that year. It was very exciting to not have to try to figure it out, to have a little money to work with.

Nathan: So it gave you time as well.

Elliott: It was that primarily.

Nathan: You've received so many awards. I've been a little arbitrary in just picking these.

Elliott: Oh, that's okay. This last one I won with Pat...

Nathan: Was it Lausanne?

Elliott: No, we won another National Endowment grant in '86.

Nathan: Oh, I may just not have figured it out.

Elliott: That time we applied with collaborative work.

Nathan: How about that Lausanne Biennal?

Elliott: That was very exciting to go to, and that was really wonderful.

Nathan: That was when you presented this large, very large work.

Elliott: Right. But as I said earlier, we discovered that it was much more beautiful cut up separately and shown on the wall. That was the way we liked it. It was really the show, itself, after the fact. I mean, after the whole preparation, thinking of it. Being there was what mattered almost more than the work. It was important to have thought it through.

But the actual basket, I don't think either of us felt was more wonderful than we had hoped. Sometimes it's more wonderful. On the wall it is more wonderful. And it gave us ideas for doing future things.

Nathan: Who would want to cut up this structure? You didn't really know, did you, what would happen?

Elliott: No. I had no idea.

Nathan: It wouldn't go poof and just fall apart.

Elliott: Well, I knew I could put it back together since I put it together once.

Nathan: Is that one of the awards that people find very impressive?

Elliott: Yes, and that is impressive in a way. It's very nice to be there and to see the work displayed. A lot depends on how the things look in that museum. A lot of it is very arbitrary. For years it was the same jury.

Nathan: Oh, really?

Elliott: Yes. All the time.

Nathan: Are these all Swiss persons?

Elliott: No, but mostly. Some from a couple of other museums.

Nathan: I see.

Elliott: Recently they've switched to one or two people each time. Not a whole lot of change. [Referring to cat] Do you mind the cat?

Nathan: No. Such a pretty cat.

Elliott: To me it was impressive to be there, and to feel a sense of history over time. I enjoyed it a lot.

Nathan: Were the other people being recognized from all around the world?

Elliott: Yes, right. There were only 50 altogether in the show.

Nathan: [Referring to cat] Where'd she go?

Elliott: One of my old students from UC, Suellen Glasshauser, was also included in that Lausanne Biennal. That was nice.

Nathan: [Referring to cat] How do you describe that color? She's sort of tortoise shell?

Elliott: She's tortoise. Right. I think so.

Nathan: Too bad the tape won't show her, because she's nice and very beautiful.

All right. There were some of the museums, some permanent exhibits and shows and museum purchases that I thought might be of particular interest.

Elliott: I think the Renwick was wonderful. Pat and I have a collaborative piece called "Nomad" in the Renwick. I'm pleased to have some work in museum collections.

Nathan: Oh yes.

Elliott: It's very nice for me to have something in the American Craft Museum in New York. They also have another piece of mine that a collector gave to them recently.

Nathan: It's interesting. A couple of times now, we've spoken of events and awards that one would expect to have consequences. That is, that there should be a series. But there's something like the "First Annual" one and that's all.

Elliott: Yes, it's true. The same thing happened in Oakland.

Nathan: Did it?

Elliott: Yes. It's all basically like going to Rhode Island. It's all one-time. Oakland had the show that was supposed to happen, I think, once every two years. It was a crafts show, and it was a big show in 1964. I spoke of it earlier. But that show never happened again. They never had another.

Nathan: I think that it means something. I don't know what it means, but I hear you speaking about this lack of consistent attention.

Elliott: But I've made my choices; I live in the place I most want to be, and I continue to do my art work.

Nathan: I have a note that you were the artist consultant for the Getty Curriculum on Developing Programs for Public Schools. Did you want to talk a little about that?

Elliott: As I've said, I've gone to two or three conferences, brief conferences, and in the summer I'll be going to one in Boston that will be on curriculum. It will be a little more of a working conference, where I advise instructors who are making out a curriculum.

I hope to plead the case for doing more actual artwork, and not so much analysis and criticism and history, though there will be all those as well. I hope that I will feel that I have made some difference in arguing the case to provide a safe place for teaching art, teaching the making of art.

Nathan: So it's teaching the making, not the history of art?

Elliott: My part of it is that I want them to acknowledge that there's a need to allow time for making art.

VIII TEACHERS AND STUDENTS OF ART

[Interview 5: May 22, 1989]##

Elliott: I've been thinking a lot more about the questions you asked last time. This is not to say I haven't thought about the others before, but these seemed very basic questions.

One of them, about how I felt about what I wanted to happen in teaching, I do, in fact, want people to feel free and open. I think more than that, I really want some kind of engagement with people.

Thinking as Half the Problem

Elliott: I want people to be thinking about what they're doing and not to feel pressured, knowing that the thinking is at least half of the project or problem. They should be aware that "playing," to see what will happen if they try something, is part of the game. They should be aware of the fact that there are many solutions. I think that's the whole point of having a classroom. I'd like to set up a classroom in which people feel free to be engaged with one another and with me.

I don't feel by that that it's simply saying, "Go do what you have in mind." If people do that, I think they should just stay at home and work as hard as they can, and do what it is that they want to do. But in a classroom, I think they have the obligation to me and to the other people and to themselves to function within that classroom. It will never be repeated again. In a way, it's a grand "happening."

I put in one part of it. I think my part should not be diminished. I think very hard about what it is that I'm going to be presenting, and why I want it at that particular point, and why I think it's important. I suggest to people that they not

take me for two classes at one time. I'm a strong personality, and I think that they should have the possibility of rejecting that if they don't want it, if they find it too hard to be with me, or to be faced with projects or problems that I set up. But I think when it does work for students, it works very well. I think they become engaged then with me, and with the project, and with the other people.

Required Attendance, but No Plan

Elliott: When I was an undergraduate, I studied art education. I referred to this earlier. Attendance was required for a workshop class. It was supposed to deal with children at various ages as they grew, different problems, developmental problems, and how to approach various age groups with art. It was a very worthwhile idea. The department chair would come to class and he would say then, "Well, what would you like to do?" I felt it was criminal. I was working at the time with several jobs, and I was trying to do artwork, and I was running around quite a lot. I didn't want the instructor to necessarily plan it. I wanted it to be a worthwhile class with some real dignity paid to us, and to himself, so that he would have thought about it before he came to class. Basically, there was no thought put into it.

Students as Planners

Elliott: Students asked if we could plan the workshop program for two months. He agreed. We had some kind of plan for what it would cover. That is, we asked if there were any requirements that the department had, and then we planned the program. We had various speakers. A number of the people in the class took part in the project. It was very exciting. We all looked forward to it, and the attendance went way up.

Nathan: Did you form committees?

Elliott: Yes, we did, and the committees had some relationship with one another. It was very active and very exciting. At the end of it, we evaluated it, we all thought it was excellent, the instructor thought it was excellent, and then he said, "And now we'll go back to our old way."

I felt very, somehow sad that he didn't know why this had been successful. I felt sad that I was going to have to waste

more time sitting in a class which just didn't make any sense to me.

Respect and Preparation

Elliott: I decided that if I ever taught, I would have respect for the students in the class, and really prepare for it. Whether it was obvious to anybody else that I had worked, didn't seem to be the point. When I taught art education at Ann Arbor, I tried to plan a program so that these people who were aware of art of all sorts would be able to go into a classroom and not only teach art, but think about the ideas of art, and I did. I was very pleased that I was able to do that. I had five classes, all different subjects. As I said earlier, it was a terribly heavy load. I taught an introduction to two-dimensional design, three-dimensional design, metals, textiles, and an art education class for art majors. There were five subjects, all different from one another.

Nathan: Were these teachers going to teach in high school?

Elliott: All the way through. I also had a number of people who were required to take some class that dealt with visual materials. There were people there who had been in the field for twenty years. It was a wide range of students, and I was very young, God help me. I was really fresh out of school. I tried to present the range of what was possible using all of this.

I did it as honestly as I could. I felt I exhausted myself and my resources for years. But I felt that it was important to do it that way. I have taught drawing and design in a few places, but mostly I've taught fiber classes. Since I find textiles terribly exciting myself, I would like to be able to pass on some of that pleasure to other people.

Aims for the Seminar

Elliott: When I taught a graduate seminar at San Francisco State last year, there were a couple of people in fiber, but most of the people covered the whole range of art. They were printmakers, photographers, painters, sculptors.

At the end, it was a very interesting class for me, and I think an interesting class for many of the people. One of the

projects that I had in mind was to make it possible for people to be aware of ways of presenting their work to other people, not in terms of selling it, but in terms of having other people understand; they needed to think through very carefully what they were doing in their art, so they could present it to other people. I wanted to make them feel more comfortable doing that. There were some people who of course were very comfortable with it, but many who were not at all.

As part of that, I had a requirement that they attend some talk where an artist spoke about his or her work using slides. Part of the assignment was to write a brief paper on what was good, what was bad, not so much the work, but in terms of how the person presented the work. There were a number of projects. There were some studio projects.

At the end, I was curious to know how people responded in this particular class. I hadn't taught at San Francisco State before. It ran the whole range. That is, some people said, "You shouldn't have done anything in the class. You should have come in and said, 'Okay, it's your class. What would you like to do?'" There were some people who said, "You should have done more of a critique in class," and some who said, "You should have done more studio projects." It was fascinating, so that obviously, there was absolutely nothing that I could have done that would have pleased everyone.

I said to myself, "Okay. That's right. I forgot I'm not God. No matter what way I pick, it's not going to do it for everybody in this situation. Let it be exciting for me, let it interest a few people who would not have been touched otherwise. Let it make some things easier for at least those people, and any of the others who are willing, and let something happen within the class that doesn't normally happen."

That's really what I'm interested in. I've been in situations where people have felt unsure, but they end up loving the subject. They don't necessarily respond to me, which is fine, and they're unaware that they respond to the subject because of me. That's okay. I'm not going to tell them that it's because of me that they suddenly are aware of what linen can do.

Where Ideas Come From

Elliott: It always amused me when people wrote theses at Berkeley, and they talked about how despite the thinking of the general public, they thought plastic was very exciting.

I would say, "Where do you think you got that idea? Can you remember anybody else who has said that?" Of course, they wouldn't at all remember that Ed Rossbach spoke of that all the time. They just couldn't imagine that they weren't being totally original.

All kinds of things like that. I couldn't believe that they were so unaware. I would say, "Well, you are very influenced by him, and you should be aware of it, or at least try to listen to what he says to see if there's a relationship." It seemed just amazing to me.

I know in his classes, what happens is people do work because they want so much to do something which pleases him, that they make artwork which is much more exciting than they would have ever done before. They surprise themselves; so they then love him, too. That doesn't particularly happen in my classes. There are some people who become terribly interested, who would not have been otherwise. There are always a few people who are somehow touched in a way that matters to them.

I think there aren't many people ever that you have as teachers that matter to you. All you can hope, I think, as a teacher, is that you reach a few people who are affected in a way, whether they go on and do artwork or not. They're affected in a way that they would not have been. They see the world differently, and respond to it differently, maybe even do artwork that's different, or become captivated by it in a way that they'd not been otherwise.

When I was teaching in high school, it was often the boys who were on probation that seemed to relate to me.

Nathan: Why was this?

Elliott: I'm not quite sure. I think I was more willing to put up with a particular kind of person than a lot of people were. They would then do wonderful work.

Nathan: But you felt committed to them?

Elliott: Oh, very much.

Nathan: As artists?

Elliott: Oh, yes. Everybody comes with different expectations. I don't especially like the nice, nice people. I think I'm perfectly happy to have somebody who's argumentative and abrasive, and interested. Even at San Francisco State, I think I spoke to a young Chicano painter who was outside of what the normal framework was. His paintings were good. He couldn't relate to the university at all. He couldn't relate to anything or anyone. I think he related to me more than to others. It was not total, but it was more. That sort of interests me. He wasn't in the position of considering intellectually what it was he was doing, but he was deeply committed to his work.

Value of Criticism and Exchange

Elliott: I remember a teacher I had. I had studied drawing and painting in high school and design. When I got to college, I hadn't done artwork for almost a year.

I was terribly anxious to work again. I could hardly contain myself when I began drawing. I was in a first-term drawing class. My teacher was very wonderful. She was sort of harsh, but she was good. She was quite restrained and silent, but she was perfectly capable of telling you what was wrong with something, at least from her point of view, or making you consider different ways of doing something.

As I said, we had done rather slick work in high school. It was good, but it was slick, and it was immature. This was the first time someone was asking me to seriously consider what it was I was doing, so that I was thinking about it much more, and not just answering the problem.

She would go around, and my work looked very good at that time. I had drawn a lot, and I loved drawing, and she would say, "Well, you know, those are very nice." I'd say, "Yes, I know, but what's wrong with them?" She was able to tell me different things that would have made the work better, or stronger, or more interesting, or a different approach than I might use, that I would not have considered myself. It made me think about the work.

She left after that year, and none of the students in the class besides me missed her; they didn't enjoy her because she had been critical. I should have learned then that that's not an

easy position to be in. I think it's one of the things that I can do and feel comfortable with.

I don't think I know what the answers are. When students say, "Well I think he should have made the tree taller or greener or something," I'd say, "Well maybe that's the way you would have made it a stronger drawing, but there are a lot of different ways of doing it. That's one. Let's see what she thinks, or he thinks about how he could have done it differently."

I want that. I want an ongoing exchange. Before I came to Berkeley, I'd pretty much given up on teaching because it seemed to me that everybody was just always concerned about the number of the locker you got, and keeping the room clean. It just didn't seem to me to have anything to do with what I was interested in. I didn't expect to teach again when I left Ann Arbor.

Styles of Teaching

Elliott: I credit Ed Rossbach with making it possible for me to see that in fact you can teach honestly. You can teach personally. You don't have to be concerned with the bookkeeping all the time; teaching is in fact, a possibility.

I don't think he makes people in the class aware that he does that, but he does do that. I learned a great deal about teaching. I don't teach at all in the same way that he does. I found it so hard that Maja Grotell was so silent all of the time. I feel that that's almost punishment for someone like me.

I saw what Ed Rossbach was able to do by insisting that people come to class. When given a choice, I had always worked at home. Most of the students I knew who really did work that they cared about and were involved with, did their work at home, and didn't come to class. They felt that they could do their best work that way. I don't think he set it up as a requirement, but he made it possible for people to come and work there, in class. Something happened then that was different, that would not have happened otherwise.

I had not seen that done before, and I really now much prefer that. I think it's possible to have much more of an exchange because of it. It's a long way of saying it, but I'm interested in each person's individual approach and I also want each student to recognize an obligation as part of the class.

Attending Class and Learning from Each Other

Elliott: I don't think everybody has to make the same mistakes, and I think people can learn from one another. So I think I emphasize having people see what other students do. Occasionally, it doesn't work with some classes, but I think school is a time when people can take a chance, and try all of the crazy things that they might not have tried otherwise.

My obligation as a teacher is to set up the kind of project where people come up with individual ideas to answer the project, to figure out what is appropriate for them in answer to the problem, and take a chance on that.

I think I've changed a lot in my teaching over the years. Nobody used slides when I first taught, and I didn't use them then, but I now feel they've become an important part of my teaching. I think it's even more important to add to the alternatives in art with visual material, not only talking about art and showing slides, but also showing the real stuff.

Demonstrating Cardweaving Technique

Elliott: I don't ever stress techniques. I don't think of myself as being a particularly accomplished technician in any direction. I think I learn how to do something well enough to do what I need to do with it, but I'm much more interested in all the other aspects of it, the basic idea underneath it, the visual idea underneath it, the narrative message if there is one, and form, and all the other things, and sometimes even materials--all the other things, and then how one puts it together.

There are people who have x-ray vision, who are skilled and adept, and who move their hands beautifully. I'm not interested in that. It seems like a gym class to me, though I'm always interested in seeing how beautifully people do it. I don't ever feel that that's part of what I do at all. Fortunately, nobody else knows that when they see the finished thing. I don't want to think about what it looks like as I demonstrate it.

I once saw someone demonstrate a technique. It was Ted Hallman. We were both teaching at CCAC at the time; I've always been interested in cardweaving and I've done a lot of it.

I never seem to lose interest in anything. I just get interested in more and more. Since I first learned cardweaving I've collected examples of it, and I've done it from time to time. I've done some very ambitious things with it. I really am very intrigued with some of the things that happen in using it.

In a class I taught, I had a student named Dorothy Field, who did absolutely astounding technical things with cardweaving. I think that she would not have done them except in my class, and that pleased me very much.

Nathan: Yes.

Elliott: She has not pursued them, sadly. They're wonderful ideas. But she had that kind of skill of seeing what was happening in a process.

Anyway, with Ted Hallman, he demonstrated for his class and my class, how cardweaving worked. It was as though it were a totally different technique from what I had shown. I barely recognized it. It looked like knitting as he did it. The end result was totally different from what I do. He was so skilled in doing it, that we were...Oh, we all went "Gasp." It was like a performance piece. That's what it was like. It was like theater. It was really wonderful, but it had nothing to do with anything that I knew as cardweaving. I said, "Do you ever do cardweaving yourself today? Is it a technique you ever use?" He said, "No, absolutely not." I then thought, "Okay. So it's clumsy the way I do it, and it takes me a long time and it doesn't look snazzy when I do it. That's okay."

Nathan: I should know what cardweaving is, but I have no clue.

Elliott: Can you hold on one second?

Nathan: You have now brought some examples of cardweaving.

Elliott: Right.

Nathan: These are strips.

Elliott: Right. I made this belt. It was very simple. This is from Nepal, and it's, I guess that's continuous. No, this is sewn together here.

Nathan: Yes, you can feel that.

Elliott: Right. Cardweaving is usually done in belts, in bands. It's easiest to do in bands. And this is what you make it with.

Nathan: These are literally cards.

Elliott: Yes, right. You can use playing cards. You see, this is why I like teaching this. I think really it's something I would not have known if somebody hadn't taught it to me or shown it to me. It's not part of what we normally see.

It was very popular in the sixties, because it can be carried so easily. Threads pass through here, and you turn them. Every time you turn them, some threads go up and some threads go down, and you put your weft in. This is the warp.

Nathan: And there are four holes forming a square.

Elliott: Right. But it can be three holes, or it can be six or eight holes.

Nathan: I see.

Elliott: Four is the most common.

Nathan: So this is super portable.

Elliott: Oh, yes. And it's also probably the oldest weaving that has been found. They find it in the Danish Bronze Age excavations. There may have been Egyptian mummy bands that were made in linen with cardweaving. They're not sure about that.

Nathan: This is done by Mary Atwater?

Elliott: With her design, but that's a common, very common design. There's a wide range of what's possible with it. Oh, here, here. This is the way it looks when you're weaving it. And this one. You can make tubes. You can do all kinds of things with it. Let's see if I have another one. Oh, here are some triangular ones.

If you hang on to this, I'll show you how it goes.

Nathan: Well thank you for showing me this. I could never have imagined that.

Elliott: No. Only one person in my life was able to imagine it, and he was an astronomer. I showed it to him and he said, "Yes, that's what I thought it would be like." But he was the only person. He said, "Yes, imagine that they thought of that."

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Elliott: This is actually twining, not really weaving. That is, the threads twist around one another and are locked in place. It is a very simple technique, and it can be very, very, very complicated.

Peter Collingwood wrote a book a couple of years ago on cardweaving that just shows the range that's possible, how complex, brocaded cloth was made with cardweaving. I'm not quite sure why I started on that.

Nathan: You were telling me that Ted Hallman was so adept at the technique, but he didn't really use it a lot.

Elliott: No. I don't even think he particularly liked it, but he was very skilled in showing how to do it, and people were very impressed. It did make it much easier for some people who had trouble making their warps for cardweaving.

When I first began I was really afraid of weaving. I had not had a very happy experience weaving at Cranbrook, but I was still interested in fiber. I learned how to do cardweaving as an undergraduate in one of my classes in art education, not in the workshop I was describing earlier.

It was a wonderful class with a woman named Fern Zwickey, who just died this year. She had been very active in the W.P.A., in puppet theaters around the world, and all kinds of art education. She taught a series of different kinds of crafts to us, one a week. I have used most of them.

It really is to her credit that I stayed engaged with weaving. When I had trouble with other aspects of fiber, I came back to cardweaving and set up warps without any equipment, and they were very tangled, and I had lots of trouble.

But the result was so beautiful. The ones I have shown you today are not remarkable. But they can be remarkable, and there's a very nice connection that I feel through time with other weavers. It's wonderful to read about the Danish Bronze Age, and see the skirts and the hats and the clothing in general made with cardweaving. The women in Finland, I think even now, use cardweaving as a way of making the band across the top of a rug, and then weave the rest of the rug. But they do the top with cardweaving as a spacing device. Somehow that really touched me as a kind of historical connection.

Nathan: This is very interesting.

Responsibility to Ideas

Nathan: I think I interrupted you when you were saying that you were somehow drawn to working with the youngsters who were on probation.

Elliott: I didn't seek them out, they sought me out. I had one student in high school that I particularly responded to, and who responded to me. It was nice that there was an adult around who cared about him, besides his family. I think it made a great difference to him.

Nathan: Were the students able to express in art rather than in other school work, did you think?

Elliott: Oh, yes. When I spoke seriously about this one child to one of the counselors, she couldn't believe that he did anything that was worthwhile. She was mistaken. His work was very fine. He was later killed in a car accident. I have a pendant of his that I am hoping to return to his family, if I can ever find the old addresses because it was many years ago. It was very special.

I didn't respond to him just because he was in trouble. I responded to him, I think partly because his ideas were outside what was ordinary, and he was willing to try things. As long as I was interested in him, he was willing to respond and try to do more work than he thought he could do. I can't ask for more than that.

I want people to work very hard. I can't understand if they don't.

I know everybody has problems, but if they care about what they're doing, they owe it to themselves, and sometimes even to the ideas they have. This Dorothy Field who is now doing lots of other work, has written to me recently from India, sending me a drawing of something she saw there that she thought was astounding that she knew I would like. I think I have always been driven, and it's very hard for me to understand that someone else isn't, or is somehow trying to figure an easy way out.

Sometimes students have wonderful ideas, and they don't feel any responsibility to the ideas. I once said to a student, "This was just wonderful, and I think you really should explore this particular way of working that you've discovered." She said, "Oh, well, that was so much work. I don't want to go on with that. One time was enough."

I really frankly couldn't understand that. I felt--I don't think I said--that she should switch to another field that maybe would touch her more.

You know, I remember reading about the ballerina who married George Balanchine, who is Native American, or partly Native American.

Nathan: Oh, Tallchief, Maria Tallchief?

Elliott: That's right. Right. Maria Tallchief. When she first was affected, I don't remember whether it was multiple sclerosis or polio that she had, but when she was quite paralyzed, she worked with a physical therapist who continued to work with her. She said, "You know the problem is that people don't understand. I love exercise. You know, that's what I do." She said that there is pleasure in movement, "so I will continue to try, you know, even if it's very slow. That is really what I do."

I feel that's what I do, too, and not exercise, and not just the pleasure of doing. Just that it's very hard for me to imagine not being interested enough and involved enough, and caring enough about what you're doing to carry it through, to see what you could do if you gave yourself a chance, or if you gave the ideas a chance. Then see what happens. Then see, you know, so that all along the way, you're moving on.

Art and Design as Part of the University

Nathan: In this vein, I wondered whether you would care to comment on the role of art departments in places like Cal, or CCAC, or JFK, maybe compared with more or less independent institutions, like the late Fiberworks or Pacific Basin. Would you like to give your thoughts?

Elliott: I really love the idea of a university. I don't think it always works the way I want it to, but I like the fact that people at a university can, in fact, use libraries, use theater, have contact with other students in other departments. I really don't like a graduate department that doesn't have a library. It's not even only access to it, I think it's absolutely crucial to a program to be part of a whole institution where you can make use of other facilities, you can go to museums. There were wonderful resources for students at UC. There were remarkable libraries and museums. None of the other institutions in this area provide those important services.

I don't think other university departments often understand the role of an art department or a design department within the institution, sadly. But I think that maybe they will sometime. They don't understand that the mind is an active part of artwork, and that history and art history and archaeology and anthropology and all of those things all really hook into one another. One thing might touch one student, so that she might go off and do a whole project, or a whole field that connects those parts together, those puzzles.

I feel, especially during the time when I was teaching at Cal, many women wanted to come to the University. Textiles provided a way in which they could enter. They often found that their true interest was in painting or in some other area.

One girl went on to medical school; a number went on into anthropology; another to architecture. They've gone into other fields some of the time, but especially in view of the women's movement, I think a program like the Design Department was important because it was flexible enough to admit people, even if they were not twenty-two or eighteen, and make it possible for them to reconsider what it was they wanted to do with their lives.

I really believe very much in that. I don't think that women should have to go through adult education programs all the time, or through programs that are outside of the normal channels. I think it's perfectly fine for them to start at different times, and to go in different directions. I think we were able to make that possible for a number of women who would not have been able to do it otherwise.

I'm sorry that there weren't more men students in the program. I think it changes the character of the program to have both, and I think that it helps; it's unnatural to have all one or the other. The program at Cal changed people's lives completely, partly by the way in which they learned to see, partly by the fact that they were able to stand and see themselves in a new way. Because they were part of a university, they then had the choice of moving in other directions.

Sometimes there are advantages for people who know what they want right from the beginning, and pursue it. But a lot of times, people do that and then much later decide that they were mistaken. I think we should, as educators or as part of any community, be accepting of people changing and reconsidering and deciding that they want to do other things.

Sadly, in textiles what's happened that is many people have reconsidered, because the field hasn't been able to provide

enough jobs. There haven't been jobs. There haven't been teaching jobs, and there haven't been other jobs for people who really care about textiles to go to who are bright, capable people. So they've often switched and gone into architecture or psychology or other fields, because they couldn't find a way of supporting themselves. I think that's very sad. But I would like to change the job situation, and not the field, not the textiles and not the students. I would like them to still feel comfortable enough and free enough in school to try anything.

Then if they have to make their peace with the world in order to support themselves, they will figure out how to do that afterwards. I don't think we were ever doing job training. I feel that it was a very exciting time for me teaching at Berkeley, and it was a very good program. I would recommend it to anyone, I mean, would have recommended it. I thought it was excellent, and I'm sad that it turned out the way it did.

Nathan: Do you foresee any way of sort of re-investing university time and interest and money in this field to replace what was there?

Elliott: I think it was a narrowness of vision that caused it. It was such a good program. I don't know if it will ever be the same again, because I think it depended on a lot of things: the mixture of people, and the breadth of the program. I don't think the alternative is the private art school.

I talked earlier about teaching at CCAC and how it attracted a different kind of student. It attracted students that had generally been talented all the way through school, and didn't necessarily have much education.

Importance of Broad Education for Artists

Elliott: I think I throw talent out the window if necessary. I much prefer students who are bright, who work hard, and who are educated or want to be educated. That appeals more to me. I think I've gone through a whole range of different feelings on this.

I thought that I didn't want to get a degree when I went for my Master's. I didn't go for my Master's. I went to simply study. Then I discovered I'd fulfilled all the requirements at Cranbrook, and they said, "Why don't you get the degree?" I said, "I'm willing." All I needed to do was show the work I had, and write a thesis. I had actually fulfilled all the requirements.

So I thought at that time it was really just important to do the artwork. But really, I don't feel that way any more. I think that it's terribly important to be broadly educated.

I was so touched the other day when my son called who is travelling with a band. He's out of touch with what's happening in the world. I began to tell him a little about China (the student movement just before Tiananmen Square), and he was so excited about it, and said, "Oh, I have to pick up a newspaper. I have to read about it. I'm sorry I haven't seen what's been going on." And I thought, "Great. That's just right."

Nathan: Yes. When you were speaking about what happens when student artists get together in the classroom, was it right to assume that you were really talking about community somehow?

Elliott: They don't need to accept the problems of community yet. I think that's just too heavy a load when students are trying to figure out who they are. But they should be aware that there are many different solutions in all areas of their lives. I don't think competition helps in the classroom.

No One Answer to a Problem

Nathan: This whole method of teaching and learning reminds me of what is being approached now in some math classrooms. There's no one single solution, and you work together until everybody understands it. Maybe artists have led the way?

Elliott: I can't figure out how the math people didn't know about it a long time ago. It seems very strange to me that it took them so long. I think art has real answers to problems. I believe very firmly in teaching how to use those techniques that go along with weaving, for instance, because something happens in your thinking as a result of doing particular things.

I think if weaving gets eliminated, if you just simply say there's a big Art Department, and everybody uses whatever materials or techniques you want, nobody will know about what happens when you thread a loom. I think something happens when you weave on a loom that's unique. I learn so much about color when I weave because colors interact in a very special way in weaving. It really is different from every other visual experience.

It seems so strange to me that they have taken so long to figure out something which artists, I think, always have known. And I think that there is simply no one answer to a problem. I think math people are very close to real artists. They like that idea, except that they still accept more of a given than most people who are serious about art, who want to somehow think outside, who don't want to read the directions, who want to make up their own rules.

I think art is one of the few subjects that we teach in which the teacher doesn't know the answer when she gives the problem. A problem is presented to which individual answers can come, and there is no one right idea. There are a lot of poor ideas that come as a result, there are a lot of good ideas that come, but there just isn't any one right way.

Sure, you can teach things like notes in music, and you can teach harmony. I think in art you can teach technique. Then what that person does with it is very individual. It's one of the things that I think people long for when they go to museums. I think that's why they listen to those tapes, because they're afraid they're not getting the message. They don't have enough faith in their own response to forget the words.

Using Visual Materials

Elliott: I think I talked a little about this one time in one of the sessions, about having gone to the Getty Museum to the meeting on curriculum, and being so depressed because the art was being made to be just like literature. People would say, "Well I made a mistake. Instead of presenting that assignment, I should have had that student go and do a report on the artist." That is not an art project. It is not working with visual materials. It is not an art project. I had a lot of trouble with this.

For a visual conference, for a conference that deals with art education, somehow we ought to be talking about and using visual material. People should be thinking of what happens with visual material. They can also be thinking and talking simultaneously about other things. But I said, "If we close it up in a box any more than this with all the words, there's not going to be any time or any open space for thinking about making art. It's all too circumscribed with words."

Nathan: Did the other people understand what you were getting at?

Elliott: A little. Some. Some. Some few people. I think that's why I was there. I was representing the artist, and the others were talking about esthetics, and art history, and art criticism, and arts administration.

You know artists have talked to one another for so many years, and the people who have the money or the power or the administration, haven't necessarily listened. So hopefully, some other people will listen and there will be enough room within this program so that people can do artwork, and not just talk about it.

Trying to do Artwork and Seeing What Happens

Nathan: How do you think artists might engage that same interest more broadly in the community to get other people enthusiastic about artwork?

Elliott: It takes so much time and so many words to have some kind of organization. I think that artists communicate through their work most of the time. I think they can do it by talking about it. People are on the whole seem a little more open to listening to artists talking about their work now.

So many people come to museums now and want to understand. I think it's so important to have people do artwork in school. I think if they have done some artwork at some stage along the way, they'll understand a lot more than having a little tape telling them what's going on. They don't have enough faith in themselves or in the process. They are so worried they're not getting the message. Instead of talking more about it, we have to encourage people to have an individual experience with the artwork.

And also to look. It's not just a "you-pay-your-money-you-get-the-message." I remember hearing a talk by Jacques Lipschitz in which he said that at one point, the art he was looking at wasn't speaking to him. Not his own work, but stuff in museums. So what he did was go to more museums and spend more time in museums and look, instead of just deciding that the work was no good.

There is a lot of work out there that doesn't necessarily speak to me. But it doesn't speak to me any more if I know that the artist was an orphan, or that he was raised in a dark house. That's not what I think it's about. And neither is it that business of dividing the painting diagonally to find the "center of interest."

I don't think art is a puzzle. I think there are artists who make things that are analytical, and maybe it helps to think that way for the work of those artists. I think that really it helps a lot more if people understand what is possible if they do something with visual materials; if they try to see what happens.

For instance, I recently was doing some drawings of some baskets of mine. I thought that the drawings I would do of the baskets would be totally different than they were, based on old drawings I used to do, and my ideas on what I planned to do, and things I had seen. I had a different notion in my mind from what happened. Then I did draw, and the drawings were totally different. They surprised me. They didn't displease me, they just were not what I thought I was going to be doing. I was dealing with very different problems. I think that that's what we somehow have to encourage, that people try something and see what happens.

To imagine what happens with a musical instrument is not the same as to play it. Or hearing it isn't the same as seeing what happens. We had a babysitter who played the flute. Once she brought her flute over, and she generously allowed my son Jeremy to try to play it. Well, he couldn't play it. He was unbelievably frustrated. He was very young. He happens to be very musical (this is not the one who's with the band, of course). This is Jeremy who does computer work. He has perfect pitch, and he is very musical, and he just couldn't understand. What he had to understand was that you can't pick up an instrument and play it, and that you can't pick up a paintbrush and do what it is you think you're going to do.

You have to pick up a paintbrush and see what happens, and then work toward getting what it is you think you'd like, or try different problems with it. There has to be some commitment. There has to be some work, there has to be some responsibility, and there has to be some imagination. Then you have to say, "Okay, this is what happens. Maybe it's not what I had in mind, but this is what I got."

Nathan: Interesting. Do you think you will do more drawing?

Elliott: Oh, yes. Yes, even though my drawings didn't come out as I thought they would. I hadn't done drawing for a long time. Someone asked if I had any drawings, and I thought I wanted to see what would happen if I drew some of my current baskets. I don't normally draw my baskets before I make them. I make the baskets as three dimensional drawings, almost to see what will happen. So it was very interesting to me to try to draw them. I have up until now taken a drawing class or gotten together with

people every few years to draw, because I feel I stop seeing when I'm not drawing. In recent years, I think I've used photography to fill that gap and have seen because of what I was seeing with a camera. When I did these few drawings, I was very excited.

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Nathan: This is interesting, particularly in light of our conversation about the calligraphy of your baskets. It's as though you are drawing with the elements of the basket itself?

Elliott: Right. But when I did the drawings, I found something else happened. It was a totally different distilled view. That was surprising. It made me remember how in high school I had this notion of the kind of drawings I would do, and they weren't at all the kind of drawings I did. I couldn't believe what I was doing, but that's okay. It's a part of yourself, I think, that doesn't necessarily show.

It surprises me, though I remember I had a friend in college who had taken tons of art history classes and looked at drawings for years and years. Then she took her first drawing class. She was like my son with the flute. She was so frustrated, she thought she'd shoot herself. She said, "You know, my standards are so high, and my drawing is so poor, and I don't honestly know what to do."

Well, you know, recently I heard of Michelangelo's note that he left, that they found after he died. It was a note to his apprentice that said, "Draw Angelico, draw. Draw and don't waste time." Just seemed wonderful to me.

Of course, that is what you do. It doesn't have to be drawing. Drawing is somehow the simplest of the ways of relating to what you see out there.

When I took my first drawing classes in high school, we were told, and the teacher was quite right, that it was a way of coordinating your hand and your eye. I love teaching drawing. I believe that I can in fact teach anyone to draw. They may not do glorious drawings, but they can do reasonable drawings, and they can do drawings that more or less will represent what it is they want to represent. It means that it's the message to Michelangelo's apprentice. It means you just draw all the time if you want that to happen.

With my friend in college, the teacher said, "Well, either you have to just stay as a total primitive, or you just have to work like hell."

Nathan: Which was the choice?

Elliott: I think she felt she had no choice. She continued as a primitive. But in fact, I don't think that's true. She could have learned to coordinate her hand and eye if she'd chosen and worked at it.

Nathan: You've spoken about what you have learned from various people, and I wondered whether you had any thoughts about Trude Guermonprez? Obviously you would be aware of her, but do you have any explanations?

Elliott: We had a very different approach, very different. Didn't I speak about her in the first tape or two?

Nathan: Yes, I wondered if in this light whether there was anything else you wanted to mention.

Elliott: Well, I think Trude taught a real regard for technique, an appreciation of beautiful cloth. I think she was a good friend. It was possible to talk with her. She once talked about the fact that she had wanted to be a doctor, a physician, originally, but for some reason or another didn't get on that particular track in Austria. Her approach to art was much the same. She felt that many people were dilettantes if they did more than one thing, that they really needed to focus in one direction.

When she looked at my work, she once said to me, "There's so much going on, I don't know where to look." She found it disturbing because of that. That's fine. It's okay. It doesn't have to be soothing.

Learning by Thinking in a Different Way

Elliott: I think each person teaches in a particular individual way. There are so many different kinds of people who are students, that I think it's wonderful to have a lot of different people with strong feelings teaching. If you can't stand one, you take another. I don't think that it has to be that everybody is everything. I think a student has an obligation to see if there's something that can be learned by thinking in a different way.

If students knew beforehand what they wanted to do, I wouldn't have to be in the classroom. They could have stayed home and worked, except that sometimes they wanted a degree.

In the sixties, it was very funny. I had a student once who came to me. We always had many, many, many more students pre-enroll in the classes than we could admit. Many more. I said, "What can you offer to the class? Why do you think that you should be in?" I didn't say this to everybody, but in this case she came to me late and asked if she could be in it, and she said, "Well, I can offer my absence. I want to take a bus trip across the country, and I'll write to you from time to time, and send in projects, and then I won't crowd up the classroom."

As far as I'm concerned, that's not being part of the class. I believe in an interchange, so it didn't make sense to me to have her in my class. If there are people that find me difficult, and they want to struggle with it, they might learn something. If they don't want to, they don't have to take the class.

I don't necessarily have that prerogative as an instructor. So I have to have, in a way, a stronger ego so I'm not affected when I don't happen to be what a student wants me to be. I don't have an obligation to be what that person wants me to be. I'm embarrassed by students who write poetry to instructors, and who give presents to the teacher at the end of each term. There are many teachers like that, and there are many students like that. Sometimes they enjoy each other.

I'm frankly very uncomfortable with it. I don't even care if they like me. I would like them to love what it is I taught. I would like them to be able to think in a way that's very different from what they were thinking when they entered, and to have learned something that they wouldn't have learned if they hadn't taken my class. That's plenty. I figure that's a long list. They can work within that. Sometimes the class is thrilling. Sometimes it's a real experience.

I had one tapestry class at CCAC that was wonderful. I had a number of classes at Cal that were great: one off-loom class that was just wonderful, the one in which Dorothy Field figured out those techniques of cardweaving. Things happened in that class that were just amazing. People touched off other things for other people, which was just what I wanted.

I now think it isn't that you wonder: "Why isn't every class like this class?" I think you have to say, "How wonderful we ever had a class like this at all," and celebrate it.

I feel the same way about the Design Department. There are things that were sad, that it was eliminated. The department was something quite wonderful. I've never seen anything like it. But maybe what was remarkable was that it even happened. I think

when most people think back on their college days, there are so few things that really touched them. It's wonderful that we had something great. I feel very fortunate that I was allowed to teach there for the few years that I was there.

Response to the Work of Other Artists

Nathan: Well, I wondered, too, in your own work, do you perceive influence from other people? Let me just throw out names; they either will or won't suggest connections: Magdalena Abakanowitz, Olga de Amaral, people who seem in some way to be stimulating. Did they touch you, or were there others?

Elliott: I had known Olga at Cranbrook. And she came back to this country with her husband, Jim, whom I'd known rather well at Cranbrook. I hadn't known her well. When I was there, she really hadn't learned English yet.

When she came back to this country, she was very frustrated because she had set up a small factory in Colombia. She'd set up this small home factory with Jim, and they had hired some workers. But she was now at a point where she could do her own work, she felt. She was having trouble starting.

I really encouraged her to begin doing tapestries, and talked to her about how wonderful her color was, that I had great faith in her. I gave her some yarn that I'd bought from a very special spinner and wished her well. She's been very successful, and that's very nice.

Nathan: Wonderful. I just threw this to you out of the blue.

Elliott: She had come back, and she had gone around and looked at other people's work that we knew. She said so often they seemed to feel that it was the hours they put in that made it worthwhile. She had people who could put in hours for her, and that it wasn't just the hours that made the work good. She was very moved by the things I was doing at the time. Sometimes, I see her when she comes back. When she came back on one of her trips, she said she and Jim remembered a piece of ceramics I had done at Cranbrook, and they wanted to trade me for anything that she had. Then I had an appliqué that she had seen once that she loved, and she wanted it for a twenty-fifth anniversary present for Jim, so we traded on that.

Nathan: That's very exciting that she remembered.

Elliott: She has given me work, too.

Well, yes. It was exciting that she remembered, that they both remembered. The pieces they wanted were very good pieces of mine.

Nathan: Do artists do a lot of this trading?

Elliott: Some do. It's uncomfortable for me, so I don't usually do it.

Although I've known Olga for many years, neither she nor Magdalena Abakanowitz has influenced me in my work. Abakanowitz has not been important for me. I've seen several shows of hers. When I went to see a large exhibit of hers in Pasadena some fifteen or twenty years ago, I also heard her speak. She said that she uses the same pieces very frequently, but she just installs them differently and lights them differently. She feels that the material she works with is light. In fact, if you touch the material of her fiber sculpture, you realize it's so harsh, it's really quite unpleasant to touch.

I'm bothered by the armatures she uses. She uses an armature in all of the large pieces. I would somehow prefer seeing a show of the armatures. It just all feels weighty, as though it's ready to fall down.

Somehow being trained as a potter made me feel that every time I saw a hanging planter, I calculated how long it would take for the rope to break, so it would come crashing down. I always feel that with her things, that they're just harsh, they're supported unnaturally, and they don't move me.

I think I have seen some of her work that is very moving. The backs, the room full of backs was terribly strong. But I'm not moved by most of her things. I was interested that she had a concept that was so large and that she wanted to work with kind of monumental themes. Many of them feel terribly dated to me today. There's something so pretentious about doing something so heavy and so large, that it sort of blocks the sun. It feels as though it's just a huge statement of ego.

Part of the problem for me, and it's not just Magdalena Abakanowitz, I think that when sculpture works, it's quite wonderful. When it doesn't, it's so ponderous, you can't escape from it. Some of her things I think do work, but not many of them.

Katherine Westphal and Ed Rossbach

Nathan: Are there other artists to whom you do respond?

Elliott: I'm very moved by Katherine Westphal's and by Ed Rossbach's work, and both quite differently from one another. They're both friends of mine, but I knew Katherine when I taught at Davis and Ed when I taught at Berkeley.

I love the playfulness that they both have in their work. There's a sense of play and of joy and of color particularly in Katherine's work that is really impressive, and that I don't think almost anybody else ever catches. She really can't be kept down. It's sort of wonderful, the bouncing quality of all her work. I think that she is interested in things being witty, and I think the color that she uses is thrilling. I don't think of my work as light or easy. I think I feel much more related in my work to what Ed does, though I know that his work is sometimes lighthearted, too. I'm more interested in form, in general, than I think I am in color. The way that Katherine uses color is really wonderful to me, but it's not what I'm mainly concerned with myself.

I'm trying to think of other artists that do speak to me. I've been interested in, and influenced by Abstract Expressionism for many years. Also, I was very interested in the Impressionists' paintings, and I did work that commented on Impressionism. I wove a tapestry that was called "Changing Colors." It used a section of a painting of Bonnard's with one small strip going through it that was like Derain's color. It changed everything. The whole color scheme and the way of looking at color was different (the end of Impressionism). So my tapestry was kind of a comment on that. For the last few years, I haven't worked with color in that way.

Space and Volume

Elliott: I've been much more concerned with somehow enclosing space, marking space, or in some way implying volume. I think that's why the baskets are appropriate.

When I was a student, an undergraduate, I took a class in sculpture.

Nathan: I was wondering about that.

Elliott: Yes. I had done that earlier in high school when I went to the Detroit Art Institute classes. At college, I took this class, and my teacher felt I was using too much clay. I wanted to just do tons of work. I didn't know how to do work and not use material. So I became very discouraged.

That's something I don't want to happen in classes of mine. I think sometimes I've made mistakes in the way in which I've taught, but I don't want that particular thing to happen.

I was so excited, that I just wanted to work and work and work. When I work, I just work. That's one of the things that I want of students.

Nathan: That was a strange response from your teacher.

Elliott: That was very strange, yes. All of my teachers, my drawing teachers, had said they felt I should do sculpture, because my drawing implied sculptural forms. I feel I will draw again, I will paint again, I'll do pottery again. All of it.

Nathan: Do you think you might pick up sculpture again also?

Elliott: It interests me. I'm not quite sure. In some ways, I do sculpture now.

Nathan: Yes.

Elliott: I'm not quite sure what directions I'd want to go in. I didn't particularly enjoy metal when I did jewelry. That is, I didn't like metal as a material. So I don't know if I want to go in that direction with sculpture.

Nathan: Do you think maybe the pottery and the basketry answer that interest in volume?

Elliott: Right now it does, yes. I'm not doing pottery right now. I did take a class a year ago or so to learn about raku. My husband was taking a class, and he was very excited. His pottery was very good. It was very different from what I do.

I found it very frustrating to be in a class again, because it was so noisy, and I had no control over how work was fired. The work had to be under a certain size in order to use the kiln. You know, all of these restrictions get in my way, sadly.

Nathan: In addition to wanting people to experience creating art, actually working in it, do you have some further direction or some hope, perhaps for the future of fiber art, if indeed that's something that is of primary interest to you.

Elliott: Well, you know, I think it's kind of interesting today that so many of the people that continue to do fiber art were trained not primarily as fiber artists. We had to work hard to learn about fiber, then we were trained. But first, we were trained as painters and sculptors. In college or graduate school, we learned about weaving, or we studied it afterward.

I thought that finally, it would be possible to learn about fiber in a university. It's disheartening to see how it's still not taken very seriously.

Weaving, and the Organic Whole

Elliott: I'm interested in all aspects of textiles. I'm interested in the Jacquard, and the industry, as well as in textiles as expression. Textiles are so much a part of all of our lives in terms of clothing and what is around us, it seems stupid to me that there are so few places now to study textiles seriously.

It also seems sad to me that when art is supposed to be including more and more different materials, both in painting and sculpture, that fiber is still considered somehow second-rate by those painters and sculptors. I imagine, in another twenty-five years, people will once again become interested in studying textiles seriously. I think at one point at Berkeley when freshmen students were asked what they wanted to do most, they said they wanted to learn how to weave. They all thought that that would be wonderful to do, and it is wonderful. I find it wonderful. Something remarkable happens with it.

When I first turned to weaving, it was because I wanted what I was making to be all of one piece. I wanted many different ideas to be put together. You know historians are always talking about this great tapestry of history. When you put something together in textile construction, things are all one. They become a single piece, even though they're many, many different ideas.

I do think it requires a different kind of thinking that many people haven't used before. I'm not interested in something that happens in weaving that many people feel is part of weaving. It's a repetition of modules. They enjoy the idea of a repetition of modules. They say that this repetitive action is part of weaving.

I think it can be. It's not the way in which I work. I'm really interested in some kind of organic whole, and I'm not interested in repetition, or in modules either.

Nathan: When you speak of an organic whole, does that suggest that you have planned out ahead of time what this piece of weaving will be?

Elliott: No, it just means that it's not going to be geometric, and it's not going to be symmetrical particularly, and it's not going to be repetitive. That's all it means. That it's more like a tree than it is like a building plan.

But something does happen with weaving that is very exciting. I remember talking with a man who was an art historian, who was at Dumbarton Oaks. He talked about how he asked a woman from the Textile Museum to teach him how to weave, because he wanted to understand what was happening in Coptic weaving. The only way he felt he would really understand it is if he ever picked up a shuttle himself, or set up a warp.

I think he was very extraordinary. I think we need to develop more people like that, so that they have some sense that things can be very simple, and still very complicated. One of my painting teachers used to talk to me about my work and would say I could take something very simple and make it very complicated, and vice versa. It's true. I think I can do that, and I think I'm interested in that. But I think weaving can do that, too. Maybe that's one of the reasons why I like it.

Reacting to Technical Restrictions##

Nathan: You were saying weaving is illusion?

Elliott: Yes. And I enjoy that idea, that it is illusion and substance simultaneously. At the same time, I think in teaching, it was always nice teaching something like weaving which has some technical aspects. It's a little like teaching printmaking, where knowing about techniques helps you to understand and appreciate good prints. It also helps in making the prints.

I suppose it's like learning punctuation and grammar, and something about structure in literature, because there's a better chance of getting good results if you know the technical restrictions. You don't have to necessarily obey them. You can fight with them. I used to fight with the loom. It was one of the things that I thought was interesting with Trude. I think

she thought the loom was friendly. I'm not sure the loom is friendly. I don't feel it's an extension of my hands, but it does do something that interests me. I think even if you're reacting against it, if there's something there, it makes it easier. I don't mean accepting rules about how one should do something.

I could get more interesting work from a class when there were technical restrictions.

Nathan: Another problem?

Elliott: Yes, it was another problem. They had to be aware of what was involved, otherwise they weren't as involved in the work. With teaching off-loom techniques, sometimes it was as though you were teaching the whole world. You were teaching everything. There were no restrictions at all.

Dimensions of Basketry

Nathan: It's interesting to hear you speak about what weaving means to you. Does basketry have a particular message for you?

Elliott: Well, it really does seem much more related to drawing, even though it's not illusion. It feels like I'm drawing in three dimensions, and I'm very interested in that idea.

It seems very free, it's still working with materials I respond to that are pliable or somewhat pliable, and it seems like I'm marking off a personal space. Each one can be an individual one. It can be different, and you don't know what it's going to be like until you're finished. Sometimes I suppose it can be repetitive. But most of the time, my things are not.

I'm really finding that it has no limits. There are a few things I require: I want the basket to sit well, or stand well. It should not quiver, or waver, or be timid. I want it to do something in space; that is, I want to use the fact that it's three dimensional.

I don't want it to look like a drawing. I want it to look different on each side, just as though you were going to turn a drawing around and see the back side of the paper. I want something else to happen on the back than happens on the front, and I want it to be a personal statement as well. I would like to do some things which use less natural materials. I think I will move on from that. I just haven't yet.

Nathan: In using natural materials, were you particularly attracted to stiff, or difficult, or resistant materials?

Elliott: So many of the baskets made in the '70s were so wimpy. They just didn't hold their form. They looked as though when the starch wore off, they'd flop. I just hated those baskets. They just didn't work at all. So I'm much more interested in materials that have some strength of their own, just as in my crêpe examples, where each of the yarns has a strong statement to make.

Nathan: If you move as you think you may, from natural materials, are you thinking of man-made materials?

Elliott: Well, I have recently incorporated some potato sacking. Not burlap, but gold-netted material that has gold packaging material on it. I think those are just wonderful materials, and I have used that a little on one of my baskets. People always think I must be really responding to nature, but it's not responding to nature. In fact, I don't think artists respond to nature much of the time. I think they respond to art. They respond to an idea they have, or to a space, or to materials.

It's not because I love growing things that I work with these materials. It's because they have some resilience, they have some way that I can work with them, I can stitch through them or bind them. I'm not trying to call forth an imaginary landscape; I really am interested in the object I'm making.

I think there's an old idea of hand crafts as being busy little hands and somehow closed minds or something. But I think eventually, well, I hope, that universities will stress the development of a mind. I really believe very strongly that that's the way. There should be enough different choices so that people can find what it is they most enjoy, to be able to develop themselves as fully as you would hope they could at a university.

Nathan: That's very thoughtful and eloquent.

Elliott: Thank you.

More on Graphic Design

Nathan: There was another aspect of your work that would be good to talk about more, at least for a couple of minutes, and that is your

book design, cover design. Part of your interest in typography? How would you describe that?

Elliott: I'm not sure. I suppose partly typography. But it seems like drawing to me again, or layout, and I'm interested in that. I like doing posters very much, and the book covers are a little like that. That is, it's public, rather than a drawing that I feel more intimate about. I like working with type, and that's what I've done on these.

I mentioned earlier that I've done a couple recently that were poetry books. But the one that I did for Ann Blinks called *In Celebration of the Curious Mind* is a photograph of a weaving that she has reconstructed. I like combining photographs with type. That's why it was fun for me to do that. I'd like to do a lot more of it.

Nathan: Have you done a lot of the posters and announcements for art shows?

Elliott: I've done all of the ones for my shows, and most of the ones for the collaborative shows. I used to like doing posters in high school. I took a poster class, and I think maybe that was the only time I did anything that was really light-hearted.

Did I describe that I did a poster once? It was a safety poster that said, "Wear white at night." I decided to illustrate it with two ghosts, and my teacher said, "You'll never win a prize with it, but please do it." It was very much fun. I think I got an honorable mention or something. I knew that they'd never put out a safety poster that had ghosts on it.

Nathan: What a great idea. Are these both books of poetry you referred to?

Elliott: Yes, right.

Nathan: And this is *The Window*?

Elliott: By Dahlia Ravikovitch.

Nathan: Could you just describe how you did that?

Elliott: This was very funny. The window in her poem is a source of some great contentment for her. It's an opening to the world, but it's complete. It was typical of the way I work. I gathered all the material I could find on windows, all the photographs from all the magazines, and all the photographs I had taken of windows, which were considerable, and then all the drawings I had of windows.

I decided that the windows looked too much like specific windows in Italy or in California. Dahlia Ravikovitch lives in Israel; I didn't know what kind of window she had in mind, and I didn't want to do a French provincial window, or a California mission style window, and not have it be appropriate for what she had in mind when she wrote the poem. I didn't want to repeat with an illustration just what the type says, but at the same time, I didn't want to contradict it by making something that's really inappropriate. So I decided I would make a window that was really an opening, some opening to the outside. I started with a photograph of an adobe fireplace that I had clipped from a magazine. Only instead of the inside being dark, I made that part white. So it's an opening, and it's upside down.

I played around with xeroxing, and I liked the fact that with the xeroxing, I could get shading of all sorts. All of the graphic designers I talked to said, "Consider doing a charcoal drawing, or something else to get that shading." Somehow xeroxing was thought to be second class. I persisted, and I'm very pleased at the way it turned out. I was worried because I didn't have control. You know, with a basket, one of the nice things is there's no technology involved, and you have total control of your materials. If you don't, you switch materials.

These books were both published in New York, and I didn't know the press. I asked for a proof, but they didn't send one, and I had no idea what it was going to look like. It looks very simple in the final result, but in the process, it was composed of many, many layers of type and acetate. I really didn't know if it would work, and I was very relieved that in fact, it turned out pretty much as I had hoped.

I had made provisions to get it exactly the way I wanted, but with many instructions and arrows. They did do pretty much what I wanted. I think I would have liked the top to be just a little blacker, so that there would be a little more contrast. I have type in white, grey, and black, and I was very afraid that you would not be able to read it. I was very afraid.

Nathan: Well, it's very legible, and it's very handsome.

Elliott: Thank you very much.

Nathan: Very nice. There's another one that's quite different in nature. This is the dust jacket for *The Secrets of the Tribe* by Chana Bloch. Could you talk a bit more about this?

Elliott: Yes. Chana saw a show I had in which I used some prints that were from Indian wood blocks. She was writing this book of

poetry at the time and liked the show I had. We had met before and hadn't particularly liked one another, but she called and asked if I would be interested in talking to her about doing the cover. I was very pleased. That seemed very nice that someone saw work of mine, and thought that it would be appropriate for what they wanted, and called.

Nathan: These are two lions who look as though they are either talking to each other or growling at each other. Were these actually part of some of your things?

Elliott: Yes, they were part of some things, though never in this particular configuration. I just had done a series of different animal prints, and they were part of it. I was pleased to use it. In this case, the publishers did omit one line of my cover design, which says, "Poems by", that was done in white. It was an important visual element. That's why I was so worried about the second cover. But it turned out pretty much as I had hoped. The first book was a much simpler project, because it was just black, red and white, and it was clear what it was supposed to be, even though they forgot one line.

Nathan: All printers will understand that. These seem rather heraldic animals.

Elliott: Yes. That's what they were supposed to be.

Nathan: I'm delighted that you said something about these.

Elliott: Yes. Often people who majored in commercial art in my high school went to an art agency after graduation, and gradually moved up the ladder, first cutting mats, and then doing various other jobs. But I knew I wanted to go to college. By the time you've graduated from college, you no longer are employable at the lowest rung in the arts agency, so it changes what your possibilities are.

I loved posters very much, and I really liked working with type. So I thought I would probably play around with that. It just didn't turn out that way.

Recently, when I worked at Pacific Basin as Artist in Residence for those two years, 1979-80 and 1980-81, one of the things that I did was make posters and graphics for the various events that I did. I really enjoyed doing that.

It's very different from weaving or making baskets. When I was talking about how I like design and like strong pattern and contrast, textiles I don't think, are really like that. I love working with the materials I work with, but I just don't think

about contrast most of the time, I think about form. I just have switched into a whole other mode.

Even with the tapestries, though they photograph all right--I mean in terms of black and white--I guess there's some contrast, though that's not my major goal. That's not what I'm really doing. There's something nicely simple about posters. There's a single message, whereas in everything else, I feel like saying more than one thing at the same time.

Nathan: It makes me think for a moment of those black appliqués of the Hebrew letters which had that kind of a graphic impact.

Elliott: Right.

Nathan: You kept that affection going for a long time?

Elliott: That's true. In fact, it reappears even in the baskets, that black silhouette against a white wall.

Nathan: That's very exciting. So do you think you might be doing a little more?

Elliott: I'd like to, I'll always want to. I thought that I would design business cards for Pat Hickman and me, or one for myself. But that somehow has not been as interesting. The posters are something else. I still have problems with it. Business cards are a whole other thing. It's your presentation to the world. Business cards seem inappropriate to me, I think. That's really the problem. I'd like my artwork to be what people see. Textiles have so much mystery and subtlety. I like people to see my textiles.

Nathan: Very good. And thank you so much for this.

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Lillian Elliott
1775 San Lorenzo
Berkeley, CA 94707

EDUCATION

B.A. Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, 1952 ,

M.F.A. Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, 1955
Major - Ceramics; Minor - Painting

WORK EXPERIENCE

1955-1959 Fabric Designer, Ford Motor Company
Styling Division, Dearborn, Michigan

1959-1960 Instructor, Art Department, University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan

1966-1971 Lecturer, Design Department, University of California, Berkeley

1972-1976 Instructor, California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, CA
Summer Sessions, University of California, Berkeley

1977-1978 Visiting Lecturer, Design Department, University of California,
Davis

1981-1986 Instructor, Pacific Basin School of Textile Arts, Berkeley

1983, 84,
86 Visiting Lecturer, Art Department, University of Michigan,
Ann Arbor, Michigan; Summer Session 1983, 1986; Fall Session 1984

1983-
present Instructor, Fiberworks, Berkeley, CA (John F. Kennedy University,
Orinda)

1984-85 Instructor, Western Design Institute, San Francisco, CA (John F.
Kennedy University, Orinda)

1985-86 Instructor, California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland

1985,87,88 Instructor, "Photographing Textiles," Textile Study Center,
M. H. deYoung Museum, San Francisco

1988 **VISITING ARTIST, SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY**

HONORS

1964-65 Louis Comfort Tiffany Grant

1976-77 National Endowment for the Arts, Individual Artist's Grant

1977-78 California Arts Council Grant, Visual Arts Program

1979-80 California Arts Council Grant, Artist-in-Residence, Pacific Basin
School of Textile Arts, Berkeley

1980-81 Grant Renewed

Nov. 1981 Artist-in-Residence, Briarcombe Foundation, Bolinas, California

Oct. 1983 Guest Artist, Banff School of Art, Banff, Alberta, Canada; Canada
Arts Council Grant

May-Sept. Swedish Women's Educational Association International (SWEA),
 1985 Travel Grant to Sweden
 1985 Designated a "California Living Treasure" by the Creative Arts
 League, Crocker Museum, Sacramento, California
 1985 Included in the 12th Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie,
 Lausanne, Switzerland
 Oct. 1986 Guest Artist, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova
 Scotia, Canada; Canada Arts Council Grant.
 1986-87 National Endowment for the Arts, Individual Artist's Grant

JUROR

1965 Richmond Designer-Craftsmen's Exhibit, Richmond, CA
 1973 Second Annual Arizona Textile Exhibition, Tempe
 1976 Juror (with Paul Soldner and Harold O'Conner), Craftsmen's
 Association of British Columbia Exhibition held in Vancouver, B.C.
 1980 San Francisco Art Festival
 1983 Juror, Textile Exhibit, San Mateo County Arts Council, Belmont, CA
 1983 Juror, Hayward Area Forum of the Arts Exhibition (with George
 Neubert and George Miyasaki), at Centennial Hall, Hayward, CA
 1984 Juror, Marin Society of Artists, Inc. (with Ian White and Joseph
 Raffael)

GUEST ARTIST

1981 Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island, as part
 of the Jacquard Project funded by the National Endowment of the
 Arts
 1981 School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
 1983 Banff School of Art, Banff, Alberta, Canada
 1986 California State University, Fullerton, California
 1986 Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia,
 Canada
 1987 University of Hawaii at Manoa

PUBLIC LECTURES

1966 Richmond Art Center, Richmond, CA
 1976 Guild of Fabric Arts, Vancouver, B.C.
 1979 Montclair State College, Montclair, NJ
 1979 Tyler College of Art, Philadelphia, PA
 1980-81 Lecture Series, Pacific Basin School of Textile Arts, Berkeley, CA
 1981 Exhibits/Projects Lecture, Fiberworks, Berkeley, CA
 1981 Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI
 1981 School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
 1982 Craft Alliance, St. Louis, Missouri
 1983 Banff School of Art, Banff, Alberta, Canada
 1983 Arizona Designer, Craftsmen's Association, Tempe
 1985 University of California, Davis
 1985 Keynote Speaker, Conference of Northern California Handweavers,
 San Jose, CA

1986 Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco (under the auspices of the Textile Study Center of the deYoung Museum, "A Personal Survey of Contemporary Swedish Textiles")
 1986 University of Michigan School of Art, Ann Arbor, Michigan

PUBLICATIONS

The Basketmaker's Art. Ed. Rob Pulleyn, Lark Books, Asheville, NC, 1986; Introduction, "Today's Baskets: The Development of a Contemporary Aesthetic".

American Crafts. Book Review: The Techniques of Tablet Weaving, 1982, by Peter Collingwood.

Arts and Activities. "Small Is Beautiful," a review of the San Francisco Crafts and Folk Art Museum, April 1983, pp. 18-19. January 1983, "Baskets," pp. 21-23.

Fiberarts. Nov./Dec. 1983, "Almost Roman Glass," pp. 20-21. Sept./Oct. 1985, Cover and lead article, "Lillian Elliott and Pat Hickman: The Pleasures and Problems of Collaboration," pp. 22-25.

In Celebration of the Curious Mind. Ed. Nora Rogers and Martha Stanley, Interweave Press, Loveland, CO, 1983; articles, "In Search of Collapse," pp. 103-110, and "Thinking of Anne [Blinks]," pp. 116-120; book cover design.

Minnesota Weaver Quarterly. Spring 1983, Vol. 1, No. 3. "Design," pp. 6-8.

School District Survey, Melvindale and Allen Park, MI, May 1960, "The Art Department" evaluation.

School District Survey, Romulus Township, MI, June 1960, "The Art Program" evaluation.

BOOK COVER DESIGNS

In Celebration of the Curious Mind, ed. Nora Rogers and Martha Stanley, Interweave Press, Loveland, CO, 1983.

Secrets of the Tribe, Chana Bloch, Sheepmeadow Press, New York, 1980.

OTHER TEACHING

1972 Berkeley Adult School, Weaving Class, Berkeley, CA
 1980-83 "Middle East Textile and Other Craft Traditions," Center for Middle East Studies, University of California, Berkeley
 1982 Workshop, Craft Alliance, St. Louis, Missouri
 1983 Workshop, Arizona Designer-Craftsmen's Association, Tempe
 1984 San Francisco Community College District, Design Instructor, San Francisco, CA
 1986 Workshop, California State University, Fullerton, CA

EXHIBITIONS**Gallery Affiliation**

Miller/Brown Gallery, 355 Hayes Street, San Francisco, CA 94102 (415) 861-2028

Commissions

San Francisco Art Commission, 1977, Woven Tapestry, 4' x 13'
Administration Building, Department of Social Services, San Francisco, CA

Collections

American Craft Museum, New York, New York
Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan
San Francisco City Art Collection (two Art Festival Purchase Awards)
California State Fair Collection
"Objects U.S.A."—Johnson's Wax Collection of Contemporary Crafts
Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan
Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona
Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan *
Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. *
Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence, Rhode Island
Savaria Museum, Szombathely, Hungary *
Pierre Pauli Foundation, Lausanne, Switzerland *
The Oakland Museum, Oakland, California *
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM, HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT *

Solo Shows

1964 Richmond Art Center, Richmond, California
 Henry Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle
1967, 71, 75 Anneberg Gallery, San Francisco
1967, 71 Galleria del Sol, Montecito (Santa Barbara), CA
1972 Arizona State University at Tempe
1979 Judah Magnes Museum, Berkeley, CA
1980 (Retrospective) Civic Arts Gallery, Walnut Creek, CA
1981 San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA
1981 Palo Alto Cultural Center, Palo Alto, CA

Invitational Exhibitions (selected)

1965 Fabric Collage Show, American Craft Museum, New York, New York
1968 "Collagen," Collage Exhibition, Kunstgewerbe Museum, Zurich,
 Switzerland
1968 "Objects, U.S.A.", Johnsons' Wax Collection and Exhibition
1971 "Tapestry—Tradition and Technique," Los Angeles County Museum of
 Art, CA
1973 "Woven Structures," Camden Art Center, London, England
1974, 76, 80 1st, 2nd, 4th International Exhibition of Miniature Textiles,
 British Crafts Centre, London, England
1980 Fiber as Art, Manila Museum of Art, Manila, Philippines
1980 Five Craftsmen, Capricorn Asunder Gallery, San Francisco

1981 Tapestry Exhibition, Vorpal Gallery, San Francisco
1981 "Vannerie" International Exhibition, Musee des Arts Decoratifs, Lausanne, Switzerland
1984 "Structural Sculpture," Mills College Gallery, Oakland, CA
1985 "California Living Treasures," E. B. Crocker Art Gallery, Sacramento, CA

Competitive Exhibitions (selected)

1954,69 Michigan Craftsmen's Show, Detroit Institute of Arts;
 Founder's Society Purchase Award (1969)
1954 Michigan Artists' Exhibition, Detroit Institute of Arts, Print Award
1954-70 Decorative Arts and Ceramics Exhibition, Wichita, Kansas
1954-64 Fiber, Clay, and Metal, St. Paul, Minnesota
1961 First California Craftsmen's Biennial, Oakland Museum, CA, three merit awards
1962-71 California Design 8-11, Pasadena, CA
1977 California Crafts X, Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA
1977 Crafts National '77, Marietta College, Marietta, Ohio
1978 Surface Design 78, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana
1979 Objects 79, Western Colorado Center for the Arts, Grand Junction, Colorado
1980 Fourth International Exhibition of Miniature Textiles, British Crafts Centre, London, England

Collaborative Exhibitions (with Pat Hickman)

1981 "Fortuny and Us," Pacific Basin Gallery, Berkeley, CA
1981 Exhibits/Projects Exhibition, Fiberworks Gallery, Berkeley, CA
 (partially funded by the National Endowment for the Arts)
1982 "Almost Roman Glass," Textiles by Design, Berkeley, CA
1982 K18-Stoffwechsel Projektgruppe Textilforum, Kassel, Germany
1982 Fourth International Biennial of Miniature Textiles, Savaria Museum, Szombathely, Hungary
1982 Japan Exhibition and Tour, Kanazawa, Japan
1982 Twelfth International Sculpture Conference Exhibition, Oakland, CA
1983 Yaw Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan
1983,86 Miller/Brown Gallery, San Francisco, CA
1983 Arizona State University at Tempe, Matthews Center
1984 San Francisco Crafts and Folk Art Museum
1985 "Works of Substance," The Sun Valley Center Gallery, Idaho
 (partially sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and The Idaho Commission on the Arts)
1985 Twelfth Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie, Lausanne, Switzerland
 The Women's Building, Los Angeles, CA
1984-85 "The New American Basket," Brainerd Art Gallery, State University College, Potsdam, NY
1986 "Collaborations Exhibit," G. H. Dalsheimer Gallery, Baltimore, MD
1986 "Fiber Revolution," Milwaukee Museum of Art

1987 "The Modern Basket: A Redefinition," Pittsburgh Center for the Arts
 1987 "Poetry of the Physical," Inaugural Exhibit, New American Craft Museum, New York, NY
 1987 "Collaboration," Richmond Art Center, Richmond, CA

International Exhibits (in collaboration with Pat Hickman)

1985 Maya Behn Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland
 1985 "Fibres Art," Musee Des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, France
 1985 "The Magnetics in Paper," Galerie De Sluis, Leidschendam, Holland
 1986 Philharmonie Gallery, Liege, Belgium; "Vannerie" catalogue
 1986 Textilgruppen, Stockholm, Sweden
 1986 Charlottenborg Exhibition, Copenhagen, Denmark

ILLUSTRATIONS OF WORK IN BOOKS

California Design - 8, 1962, publication of the Pasadena Art Museum.
Design - 9, 1964
Design - 10, 1967
Design - 11, 1971

Fabric Collage, Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York, 1965; photo.

The New American Tapestry, Ruth Kaufmann, 1966; two photos.

Collagen, Kunstgewerbemuseum Zurich, Switzerland, 1968; photo.

Objects: U.S.A., Lee Nordness, Viking Press, 1970; photo.

Homes Are for People, Satenig St. Marie, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1972; photo.

Weaving: A Craftsman's Handbook, Shirley Held, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1972; photo.

Step-by-Step Tablet Weaving, Marjorie and William Snow, Western Publishing Co., Inc., 1973; three photos, p. 70.

Lace, Virginia Bath, Henry Regnery Co., Chicago, 1974; three photos, pp. 32, 154.

Card Weaving, Candace Crockett, Watson, Guptill, NY, 1973; four photos, pp. 33, 70, 72, 135.

Your Portable Museum, American Crafts Council, NY, 1973; Weaving I, slides and biography.

Who's Who in American Art, 1973, Jacques Cattell Press, Tempe, Arizona.

Nets and Netting, Irene Waller, Studio Vista, London, 1976; photo.

Jewish Yellow Pages, Mae Shafter Rockland, Schocken Books, NY, 1976; photo, pp. 57-58.

The New Basketry, Ed Rossbach, Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1976; five photos, pp. 47, 62, 63, 95.

Weaving: Creative Approaches to Fiber Construction, Elfleda Russell, Little, Brown, 1977; photos.

Tradition and Change: The New American Craftsman, Julie Hall, E. D. Dutton, 1978; photo.

Ikat Technique, Jackie Battenfield, Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1978; four photos.

Woven Works, John and Susan Hamamura, Chronicle Books, San Francisco, 1978; four photos (of two pieces).

Fiberarts Design Book, Fiberarts Publishing Co., 1980; two photos.

K18-Stoffwechsel Projekt Gruppe Textilforum, Kassel, Germany, 1982.

California Crafts XIV, Living Treasures of California, Creative Arts League, Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, 1985; four photos, pp. 19, 21, 47, 67.

New Textile, Selection from the Collection of Savaria Museum, Peter Fitz, Saaria, Szombathely, Hungary, 1985, one photo.

Craft Today, Poetry of the Physical, American Craft Museum, Paul J. Smith and Edward Lucie-Smith, Pub. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, New York.

ILLUSTRATIONS OF WORK SHOWN IN PERIODICALS

General:

Craft Horizons Magazine, published by the American Crafts Council, 44 West 53rd Street, New York, NY

May/June, 1964, p. 17: "Quiet Words," applique and embroidery

July/August, 1964, p. 16: two illustrations of "Needlepoint Tapestry"

March/April, 1965, p. 17: "A Walk with Cezanne," applique and embroidery

May/June, 1965: "Woven Tapestry"

West Art, newspaper

July 1964, Vol. 2, No. 11, p. 1: photo of "Needlepoint Tapestry"

June 1967: photo of "Eclipse," woven tapestry

The Seattle Times, December 20, 1964, p. 41: photo of Torah Curtain

The Los Angeles Times, Sunday Magazine Section, March 1965: color photo of "Summer Rug"

The San Francisco Examiner, California Living Section, week of May 9, 1965, p. 20: photo of "Summer Rug"

Ms. Magazine, photo article by Sandra Harner, January 1979

Fiberarts, magazine, Gallery Section, Jan/Feb 1982, p. 17

Articles:

Handweaver's Bulletin, article, Vol. IV, No. 12, July 1964

The Berkeley Gazette, article, May 12, 1965, p. 12

American Craft Magazine, "Collaboration: Elliott/Hickman," article by Mary Stofflet, Dec. 1971-Jan. 1982, pp. 28-31, includes nine photos.

Fiberarts, magazine, Interview with Jan Janeiro, with photos, March/April 1982

"Three Living Treasures from California," article with photos by Joanne S. Brandford and Sandra D. Harner, Sept/Oct. 1985, p. 70

The Goodfellow Review of Crafts, April/May 1983, Portfolio, p. 3

Form Magazine, "Textilare" from the USA by Kerstin Wickman, Stockholm, Sweden, Nov. 1985.

Artweek, July 12, 1986, p. 4, "The Ethereal Vessel," by Carolyn Prince Batchelor, photo.

Reviews:

The Phoenix Gazette, October 23, 1971

Artweek, August 26, 1972, p. 11

September 24, 1977, p. 3

August 1, 1980, p. 5

Craft Horizons, October 1975, p. 35

Westart, July 25, 1980, p. 8

The Sacramento Bee, January 20, 1985: photo of "Yi Dynasty" on cover of **Encore**, review on p. 10

The Sacramento Union, Sunday, January 20, 1985, p. C 8, photo of tapestry, "Connections"

PAT HICKMAN
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EDUCATION

B.A. University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, 1962

M.A. University of California, Berkeley, California, 1977
Major - Design/Textiles

WORK EXPERIENCE

1978 Lecturer, Design Department, University of California, Berkeley

1978 Chair, Textile Department, M.H. deYoung Museum Art School, San Francisco

1978-81 Lecturer, Design Department, University of California, Davis
1984-85,
1989

1980-86 Instructor, Pacific Basin School of Textile Arts, Berkeley

1981-90 Research Associate, Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley

1983-90 Lecturer, Art Department, San Francisco State University

1983, 1989 Lecturer, Textile Department, California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland

1985-90 Instructor, Textile Arts Program (Fiberworks) JFK University, San Francisco; Core Faculty, 1988-90

1986 Lecturer, California College of Arts and Crafts Extension

1986- summer Workshop Instructor, International Basketry Symposium, Harrison Hot Springs, British Columbia, Canada

1987- present Workshop Instructor, Fiber Sculpture, Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival, University of Alaska.

1989- Workshop, "Basketry Focus", Harbourfront, Toronto, CANADA

1990- summer Workshop, Seminar leader, National Handweavers Conference, "Convergence '90", San Jose, CA

1990- present Assistant Professor, Head, Fiber Program, Art Department, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu

HONORS

Nov. 1981 Artist-in-Residence, Briarcombe Foundation, Bolinas, California

Oct. 1983 Guest Artist, Banff School of Art, Banff, Alberta, Canada; Canada Arts Council Grant

Oct. 1984 Guest Artist/Lecturer, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada; Canada Arts Council Grant

1985 Included in the 12th Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie, Lausanne, Switzerland

1986-87 National Endowment for the Arts, Individual Artists' Grant

1990- summer Travel/Research Grant to Turkey, Institute of Turkish Studies, Washington, D.C.

COLLECTIONS

Savaria Museum, Szombathely, Hungary

Art Collections, Matthews Center, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ

Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Jack Lenor Larsen Collection

Pierre Pauli Foundation, Lausanne, Switzerland

The Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA

The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT

Erie Art Museum, Erie, PA

El Canelo De Nos Center, San Bernardo, Chile

EXHIBITIONS

SOLO SHOWS

Wurster Hall Art Gallery, University of California, Berkeley - 1976

Pacific Basin Textile Arts Gallery, Berkeley, California - 1979

Art Gallery, Department of Creative Arts, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana - 1980

Cuesta College Art Gallery, San Luis Obispo, California - 1980

COLLABORATIVE SHOWS (with Lillian Elliott)

"Fortuny and Us", Pacific Basin Textile Arts Gallery, Berkeley, California - 1981

Exhibits/Projects Exhibition at Fiberworks Gallery, Berkeley, CA - 1981
(Partially funded by the National Endowment for the Arts)

"Almost Roman Glass", Textiles by Design, Berkeley, California - 1982

Yaw Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan - 1983

Miller/Brown Gallery, San Francisco, California - 1983, 1986

EXHIBITIONS (continued)

COLLABORATIVE SHOWS (continued)

Arizona State University at Tempe, Matthews Center - 1983
San Francisco Crafts and Folk Art Museum - 1984
The Woman's Building, Los Angeles, California - 1986
"Collaborations Exhibit", G.H. Dalsheimer Gallery, Baltimore,
MD - 1986

Elliott/Hickman: A Collaboration, Richmond Art Center, Richmond,
CA - 1987

INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITS (in collaboration with Lillian Elliott)

Maya Behn Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland - 1985
"Fibres Art", Musee Des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, France - 1985
"The Magnetics in Paper", Galerie De Sluis, Leidschendam,
Holland - 1985
Philharmonie Gallery, Liege, Belgium - 1986; "Vannerie" catalogue
Textilgruppen, Stockholm, Sweden - 1986
Charlottenborg Exhibition, Copenhagen, Denmark - 1986
International Textile Fair '87, Kyoto, Japan
Frontiers in Fiber: The Americans, No. Dakota Museum of Art, USIA
tour in the Far East, 1988-1990
Textile Art Salt's Mill Exhibition, Bradford, England, 1990.
(Exhibition of Textiles from the Collection of the Pierre Pauli
Association and the Lausanne Biennial, Switzerland)

COMPETITIVE EXHIBITIONS (Selected, with recognition)

"Surface Design '78", Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana
(Award for Exceptional Excellence)
"The California Craftsman", Monterey Peninsula Museum of Art,
Monterey, California: 1978 (Judges' Award)
"Crafts National '77, '78", Marietta College, Marietta,
Ohio (Judges' Award)
"Functional Forms: 1979", Fairbanks Gallery, Oregon State University,
Corvallis, Oregon (Judges' Award)
"11th Bi-Annual Juried Show", Hill Country Arts Foundation, Ingram,
Texas: 1979 (Fibre Award; Mixed Media Award)
"Tradition & Change", Houston Designer Craftsmen, Houston, Texas:
1980 (Award of Excellence)
"California Crafts XIII", Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, 1983
(Judges' Award, collaborative work)
"The Container Show", South Dallas Cultural Center,
1988 (Judge's Award)

INVITATIONAL EXHIBITS (selected)

"Beyond the Fringe", Project Gallery, Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1979
"Fibre Artists", Arts Place Gallery, Portland, Oregon: 1980
"Wearable Art", Centre des Arts Visuels, Montreal, Quebec, Canada:
1980
Textile Exhibit, Vorpal Gallery, San Francisco, California: 1981

INVITATIONAL EXHIBITIONS (continued)

Gayle Willson Gallery, Southampton, New York: 1981, 1984, 1987
K18-Stoffwechsel Projektgruppe Textilforum, Kassel, Germany: 1982
4th International Biennial of Miniature Textiles, Savaria Museum
Szombathely, Hungary: 1982; 5th International: 1984
12th International Sculpture Conference Exhibitions, Oakland, CA: 1982
"American Artforms Abroad", Hawaii, the Philippines, & Hong Kong: 1982-83
"The Presence of Light", The Meadows Gallery, SMU, Dallas, Texas;
Modern Master Tapestries, New York City: 1984
"The Modern Basket: At the Edge", Visual Arts Center of Alaska,
Anchorage, Alaska: 1984
"The Architecture of Textiles", University of California, Davis: 1985
"Works of Substance", Sun Valley Center Gallery, Ketchum, Idaho: 1985
"Fiber R/Evolution", University Art Museum, The University of
Wisconsin-Milwaukee, juried section: 1986; catalogue pp. 74-75
"Poetry of the Physical", American Craft Museum, New York: 1986;
"INTERLACING: The Elemental Fabric": 1987
NEA Fellowship Recipients, Fiberworks, Berkeley, CA: 1987
"Paper Dimensions: Sculptural Paper by Bay Area Women Artists",
Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley, CA: 1989
"The Boat Show: Fantastic Vessels, Fictional Voyages, The Smithsonian
Institution National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC: 1989
and the Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME: 1990
"Meeting Ground: Basketry Traditions and Sculptural Forms", Arizona
State University Art Museum, Tempe and the Forum Gallery,
St. Louis, MO: 1990
"From Tapestry to Vessel", Palo Alto Cultural Center, Palo Alto, CA: 1990
"1st Aunaual Basketry Invitational", The Sybaris Gallery, Royal Oak,
MI: 1990
"Insight: Basketry for the 90's", Clay and Fiber Gallery, Taos, NM: 1990
"The Tactile Vessel", Bellevue Art Museum, Bellevue, WA: 1990
(Exhibition from the Erie Art Museum Collection, Erie, PA.)

PUBLICATIONS

Hickman, Pat, "Gutwork", Fiberarts Magazine, Nov/Dec 1980
"Archeological Rags", Fiberarts Magazine, Jan/Feb 1982
"Poetry/Clothing" Review, Fiberarts Magazine, Sept/Oct 1983

Hickman, Pat, Turkish Oya (Needlelace Edging) M.A. thesis, University of
California, Berkeley, 1977

Hickman, Pat, Book review of Textiles of Africa, edited by Dale Idiens and
K.G. Ponting, Council for Museum Anthropology Newsletter, Vol 6, No.2

Hickman, Pat, Book review of The Influence of Ottoman Turkish Textiles and
Costume in Eastern Europe by Veronika Gervers, the Turkish Studies
Association Bulletin, March, 1983, pp. 40-41

Hickman, Pat, Book review of Turkmen Costumes by Sabiha Tansug, The
Turkish Studies Association Bulletin, March, 1986, pp. 45-46

PUBLICATIONS (continued)

Rogers, Nora and Martha Stanley, eds., In Celebration of the Curious Mind, Interweave Press, Loveland, CO, 1983; articles, "Turkish Needlelace: Oya", pp. 35-43, and "Thinking of Anne (Blinks)", pp. 116-120

Randall, Joan, ed. Art of the Hmong Americans, University of California, Davis, 1985; article by Pat Hickman, "Hmong Textile Art", pp. 15-21

Hickman, Pat, Innnerskins/Outerskins Gut and Fishskin, catalogue of exhibit guest curated, San Francisco Craft & Folk Art Museum, 1987

Hickman, Pat, Embellished Lives, Customs and Costumes of the Jewish Communities of Turkey, catalogue of exhibit, co-curated by Pat Hickman and Michael Cheyet, Judah L. Magnes Museum, Berkeley, California, 1989

ARTICLES

Elliot, Lillian, "Almost Roman Glass", Fiberarts Magazine, Nov/Dec 1983

Miller, Chelsea, "Fiber as Structure", Artweek, Feb. 23, 1985, pp. 4

Stofflet, Mary, "Collaboration: Elliott/Hickman", American Craft, Dec 1981/Jan 1982

Elliott, Lillian and Pat Hickman, "Special Issue: Collaboration", cover article, Fiberarts Magazine, pp. 22-25, Sept/Oct 1985

Wickman, Kerstin, "Textilare" from the USA, Form Magazine, Stockholm, Sweden, Nov. 1985

Batchelor, Carolyn Prince, "The Ethereal Vessel", Artweek, July 12, 1986, p. 4

Freestone, Julie, "Turkish exhibit explores richness of Sephardic Culture", the Northern California Jewish Bulletin, p.33, Nov. 3, 1989. (Review of exhibition at the Judah L. Magnes Museum)

ILLUSTRATION OF WORK (selected)

Rossbach, Ed, "One Man's Bias on Surface Design", Craft Horizons, Apr. 1978

Fiberarts Magazine Mar/Apr 1980; Jan/Feb 1982; Jan/Feb 1983; Nov/Dec 1983; Jan/Feb 1984

American Craft Aug/Sept 1980; Feb/Mar 1983; Oct/Nov 1985

Art and/or Craft; USA & Japan, 1982, p. 41

ILLIUSTRATION OF WORK (continued)

K18-Stoffwechsel, Kassel, Germany, 1982, 3 photos

New Textile, Selection from the collection of Savaria Museum, Szombathely, Hungary, 1984, p. 12. 4th and 5th International Biennial of Miniature Textiles, Savaria Museum, 1982, Fig. 38; 1984, Fig. 76, Hungary

The Goodfellow Review of Crafts, Apr/May 1983, Portfolio p.3

Mattera, Joanne, BY DESIGN "The Weave of Function and Art in the Handmade Basket", Metropolis, Apr. 1984

Pulleyn, Rob, ed., The Basketmaker's Art, 1986, p. 86

Mayer, Barbara, Contemporary American Craft Art: A Collector's Guide

En Masse/Fiber, St. Louis Gallery of Comtempory Art, 1988

Smithsonian Magazine, "Vessels Borne on Fantasy", July 1989, p. 125

Three Living Treasures from California

Of the 18 artists honored in *California Crafts XIV: Living Treasures of California*, three work in fiber—Lillian Elliott, Ragnhild Langlet, and Ed Rossbach. The Creative Arts League of Sacramento, sponsor of the exhibition at the Crocker Art Museum, modeled its selection criteria on the Japanese concept of living cultural treasures: "... the [living, California-based] artist's work must have spanned a period of 25 years or more . . . [and] have been of a significantly high level of craftsmanship and creativity to have influenced the development of other craftsmen in their field . . . the persons so designated . . . should still be producing." And producing they are!

While each of the three artists work with fiber, the similarities end there. Exhibiting ten works each, Elliott and Rossbach both chose constructed pieces, but with widely different focuses; Langlet's were of dyed and stitched linen.

Rossbach selected from his work of 1954-84, including a length of woven silk drapery/upholstery yardage, be-

speaking his appreciation of one source of contemporary fiber art often ignored; San Blas, a 1966 scaffolded weave with twining; and a 1957 silk double ikat, which was surely a harbinger of the current interest in ikat. The 1984 Fayoum Basket is a curiously haunting blend of the ancient and the thoroughly contemporary.

Langlet's Hyrum Horse, an indigo dyed appliqued batik made in 1964, foretells the illusion and drama of her later large-scale works, which evoke the brilliance of sunlight, as well as the swirling movements of air, water, and clouds. While particularly breathtaking at a distance, they are equally satisfying at close range, where the subtlety and softness of their dyed and stitched details can be appreciated. In her most recent creations, stitched embellishment—metallic, crisp, and shimmering—signals her ever-expanding artistic vision.

Vitality permeates Lillian Elliott's work, from her intimate applique/embroideries of the 1960s to her most

recent Plaited Basket, a luscious and lushly-painted 1984 work. Her woven tapestries are extraordinarily expressive, some strong and muscular, while others, such as *Changing Color*, are soft and delicate. The titles of some works, such as *Goya*, and the stylistic approach to others, suggest Elliott's sense of connectedness to past artists and artistic traditions.

Transcending the medium, each of these artists has brought fiber to art and art to fiber. In the best possible sense, they are pathmakers.

(Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California, January 19-April 14.)

—Joanne Segal Brandford and Sandra Dickey Harner

Joanne Segal Brandford is a textile artist and free-lance curator living in Ithaca, New York. Sandra Dickey Harner, from Norwalk, Connecticut, is an artist, writer, and researcher in fiber art as a cultural barometer.

Lillian Elliott and Pat Hickman: The Pleasures and Problems of Collaboration

Lillian Elliott and Pat Hickman are Berkeley, California artists who not only create their individual and remarkably different art work, but also, for five years now, have produced a body of joint work—baskets, bas-reliefs, and a series of "almost" Roman glass [see November/December 1983 *FIBERARTS*]. They never sat down and decided to collaborate; it all happened gradually. Both women have similar demands on their time—they are wives and mothers, they have teaching schedules at various San Francisco Bay Area institutions, they juggle schedules as do other women artists. They also are committed to doing art work.

Their backgrounds and training are very different. Elliott got her degree in ceramics and painting from the Cranbrook Academy of Art; Hickman did her graduate work in textiles in the design department at the University of California, Berkeley; she first studied with Elliott in non-loom and loom weaving classes, and then with Ed Rossbach in graduate school.

In the late 1970s, they began meeting regularly to work on and critically appraise their separate art work. Out of those sessions developed a mutual respect, a friendship, a sense of knowing what the other person was trying to achieve artistically. At times, new directions in work were explored, chosen from the thousands of paths waiting to be traveled. During one such session, Elliott said she'd like a "skin" to cover her basketry structure, assuming it would be of paper or cloth; Hickman suggested that gut, the material with which she works, could be a good choice. At the same time, Hickman wanted to work three dimensionally, to understand volume, and she felt Elliott could help her pursue this direction. So they decided to combine efforts on one piece.

The idea of collaboration bothers many people. Artmaking so often seems a very individual and solitary activity—how can it be otherwise? These two artists respond to this question with their separate thoughts about working together.

LILLIAN ELLIOTT

I've always felt very possessive about my art work and the notion of involving other people in the process of artmaking has seemed strange to me. Committees doing art work together seems a ridiculous notion. I'm now doing collaborative work with Pat Hickman only because together we're able to make objects which neither of us can accomplish alone.

Obviously, there are difficulties in collaborating. We must depend upon one another. Trust is essential, and so is absolute, brutal honesty, so that neither person adapts or compromises just in order to please the other. Pat and I frequently tell one another that the work is *not* acceptable, and that we have to re-do it or cut it up. Because of that, we can continue to try for something unknown.

There are pleasures as well. Collaboration provides a built-in support group. We can share the necessary but boring paper work, such as answering mail or sending out slides. And with both of us photographing our work, it's considerably easier to choose a photograph which satisfies us both. Incidentally, by working together our individual photographic skills have improved greatly. My photographs have finally become sharper because of Pat's keen eyesight and high standards. Pat's photographs now show volume which I (and now she) absolutely require.

Sometimes I get bored with my own taste. It's wonderful to visualize in a different way, and the collaboration helps me to do this.

In our working together, the roles are clearly defined. I always make the basic structure and Pat applies the skin-like surface. If there is calligraphy to be added, I do that while Pat does any lacing on the surface. We both do any surface painting, depending on the effect we are trying for.

We tread the collaborative ground carefully. We don't really know how long we'll continue working together in the same way, but for now we agree that collaboration makes things possible which would not be possible for us alone. I don't think collaboration is for everyone, and even for those who *are* successful with it, it is not possible to collaborate with everyone. We feel fortunate to have been able to work together for five years. □

PAT HICKMAN

Soon after we began working together, we expressed the desire to push limits regarding the work. Of course there were real-life limitations like economic realities, studio space, shipping problems, storage space, all of which eventually affected the size of our work. We decided to try working as if some of those restrictions weren't there. The minute we felt caution or restraint changing our work, we encouraged each other to aim for the bolder and more courageous. We agree with Dan Cameron's statement in the article "Against Collaboration" from the March, 1984 issue of *Arts Magazine*: "History proves consistently that two wills often succeed in making a crucial breakthrough where one will might have experienced a failure of nerve." For me, the collaboration has meant taking more risks, not being "safe" or doing only that which is known or predictable.

Having our design proposal accepted for this year's 12th International Biennial of Tapestry in Lausanne, Switzerland [which has a theme of Fiber Art as Sculpture], has provided the chance to go further beyond the limits we had imagined. There are new structural problems in working on a large sculptural scale. We have had to share the challenges of this increased scale, including the financial burden and shipping problems of international exhibiting. Collaboration has made it easier to allow ourselves to imagine and wonder and dream

How does our process actually work? We do not jointly own or rent a glorious, clear, large studio space, though we dream about one. One or two days a week, one of us travels across town to work at the other's house. Unless we are working on one extremely large piece, we seldom both work on the same piece at the same time. It is understood who does what on our pieces; we bring to the collaboration our separate skills and strengths and materials. Based on our working together, I've discovered a few ingredients that are crucial to the success of collaboration. The work must be equally shared—from the planning, through producing, and finally to enjoying the full credit for what each has done.

We feel that each artist also must do their separate art work, significantly different from the joint body of work. It is a balancing act to find the time for individual art work, the time when there is no person waiting to see progress on a collaborative project.

Feeling free to talk about this need for private time makes it possible for individual rhythms to come forward and collaborative rhythms to recede for awhile. Lillian was in Sweden for four months this past summer, providing a break that was welcome and also healthy for an intense working relationship.

Neither one of us feels that collaboration is easy. We have different levels of energy, different paces and different personalities and it has become increasingly important to be sensitive to these differences. There are strains, yet they are worth the risk, the commitment, and the results. There are qualms about crossing lines into the other's territory, yet we confront those lines and don't just hesitantly circle around each other.

As long as there are things which together we find visually exciting and there are new directions in the work because of joint efforts, we hope to continue collaborating. In the competitive art field, working together helps us keep our perspective on what really matters to us and encourages us to embrace the artistic unknown. □



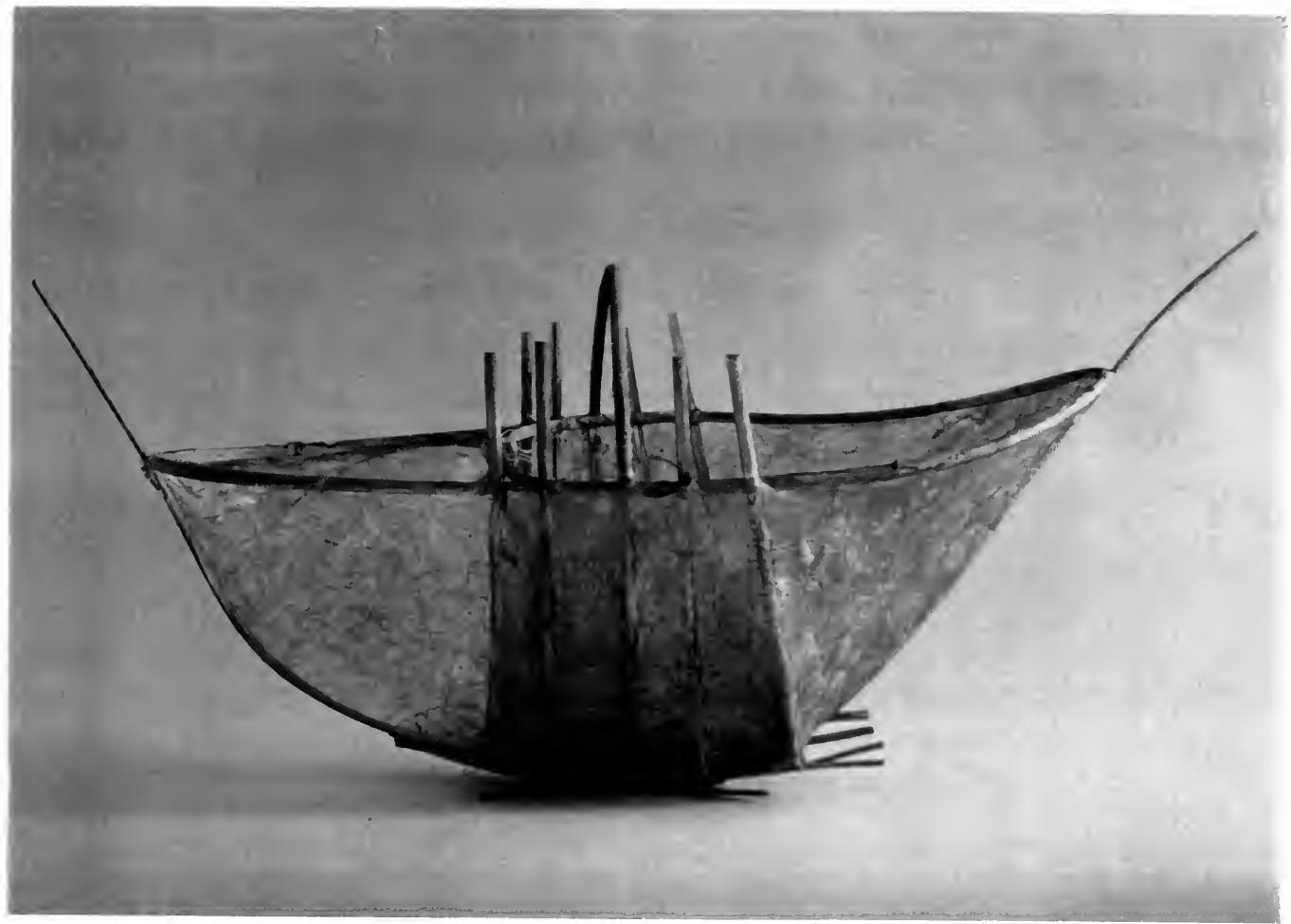
Tapestry for San Francisco Bureau of Social Services (detail)

Lillian Elliott, 1977

4'Hx13'W

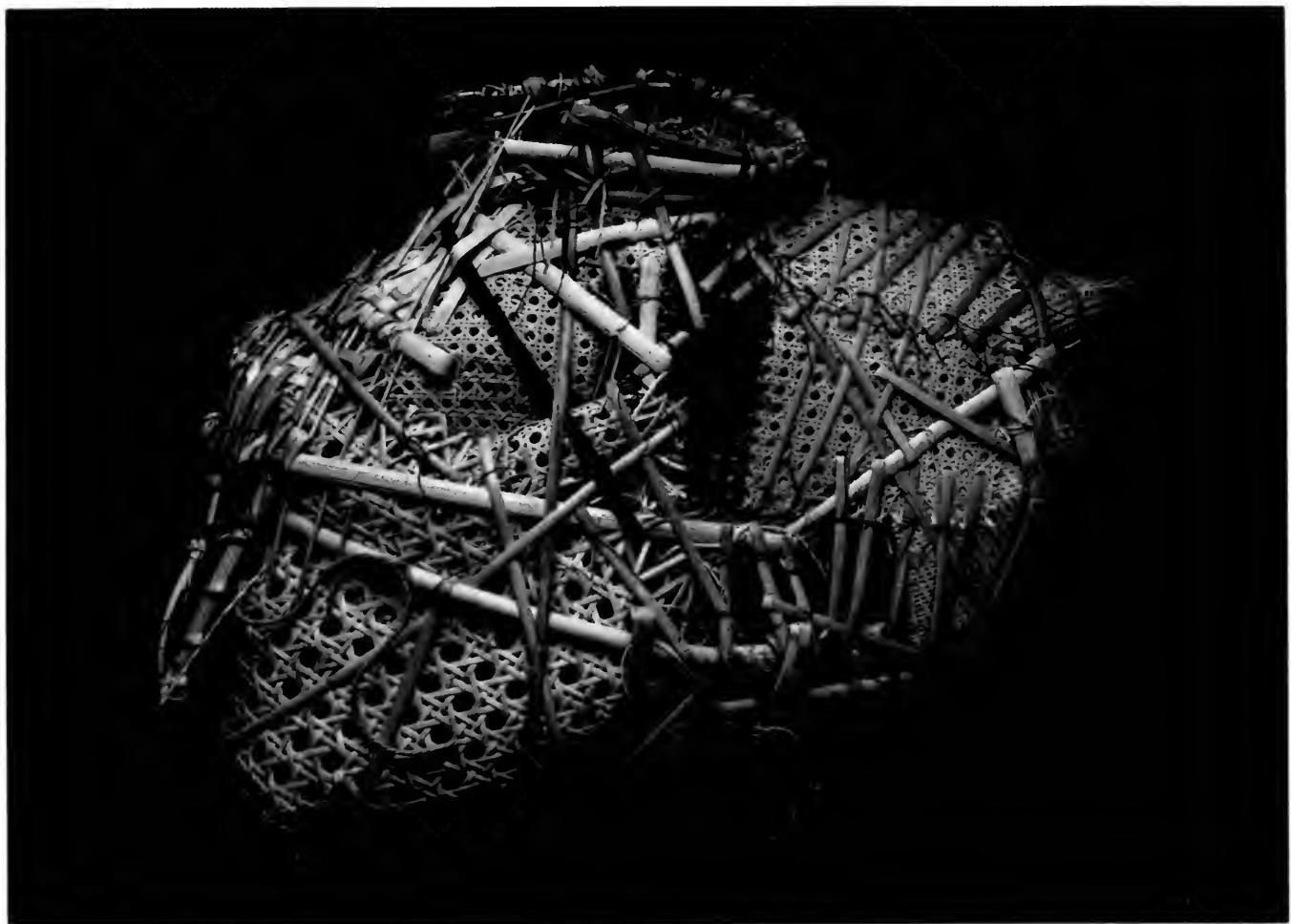
wool, cotton

Photograph by Scott McCue



"River Styx"
Lillian Elliott and Pat Hickman, 1987
17" H x 36" W x 17" D
mixed materials

Photograph by Pat Hickman



"Mummy Bundle" (basket)
In the collection of Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum
Lillian Elliott, 1986
22"Hx30"Wx30"D
mixed materials

Photograph by Scott McCue



"Connections" (woven tapestry)
Lillian Elliott, 1984
23" H x 48" W x 4" D
wool, cotton, mixed materials

Photograph by Scott McCue



"Ho Lachmo Anyo" (Passover hanging)
Lillian Elliott, 1976
96" H x 30" W
silk weaving, linen applique

Photograph by Scott McCue



"Changing Colors" (woven tapestry)
Lillian Elliott, 1984
6'Hx4'W
wool, cotton

Photograph by Scott McCue



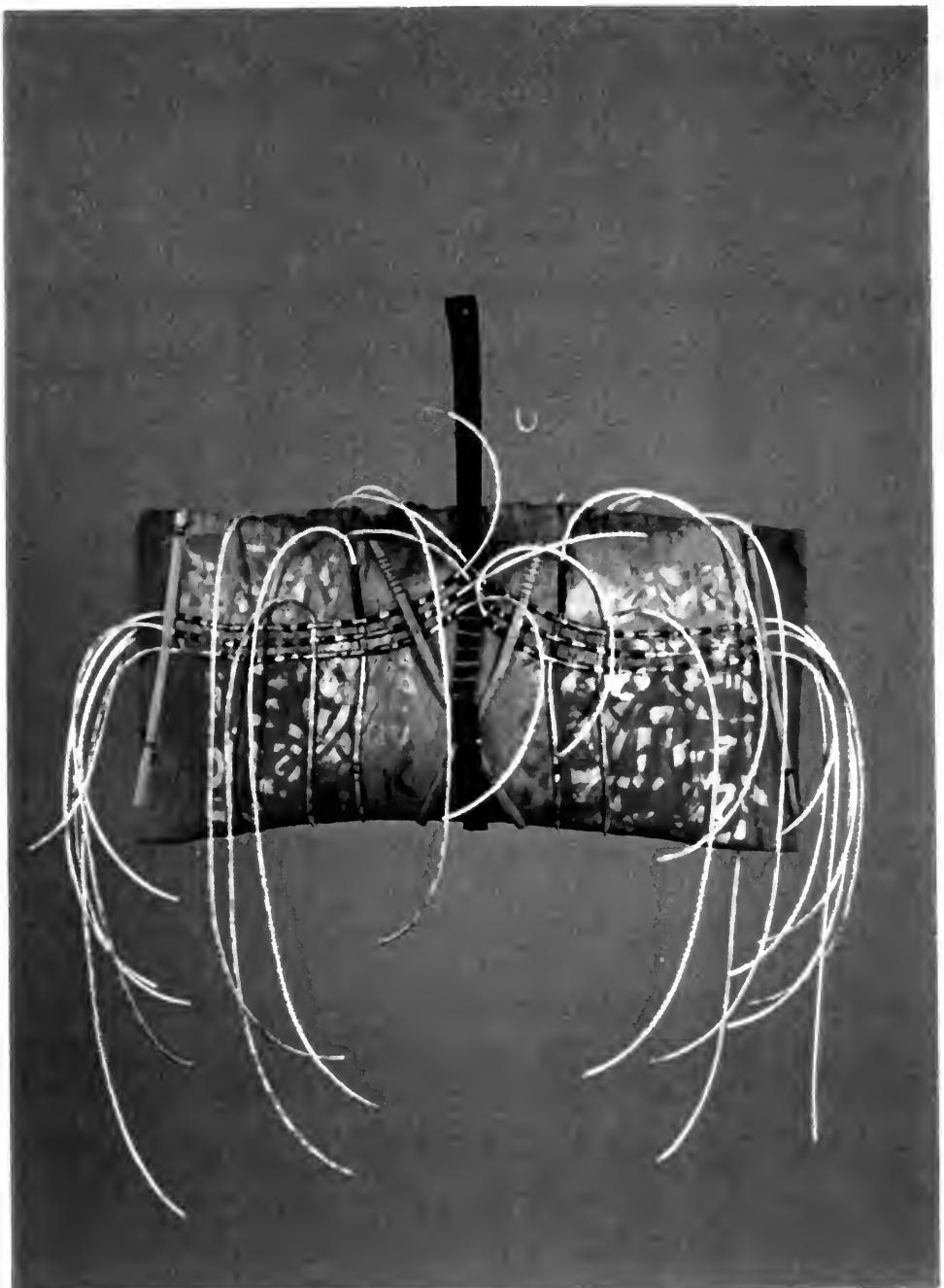
"Figure" (basket)
Lillian Elliott, 1989
17" H x 14" W x 11" D
bark, linen

Photograph by Scott McCue



"Gilding the Lily-Bottle & Bowl"
Lillian Elliott, 1989
12" H x 12½" W x 10" D bottle
7" H x 12½" W x 11" D bowl
bark paper, acrylics, linen

Photograph by Scott McCue



"Celebration" (basket)
Lillian Elliott, 1989
17" H x 21" W x 4½" D
mixed materials

Photograph by Scott McCue



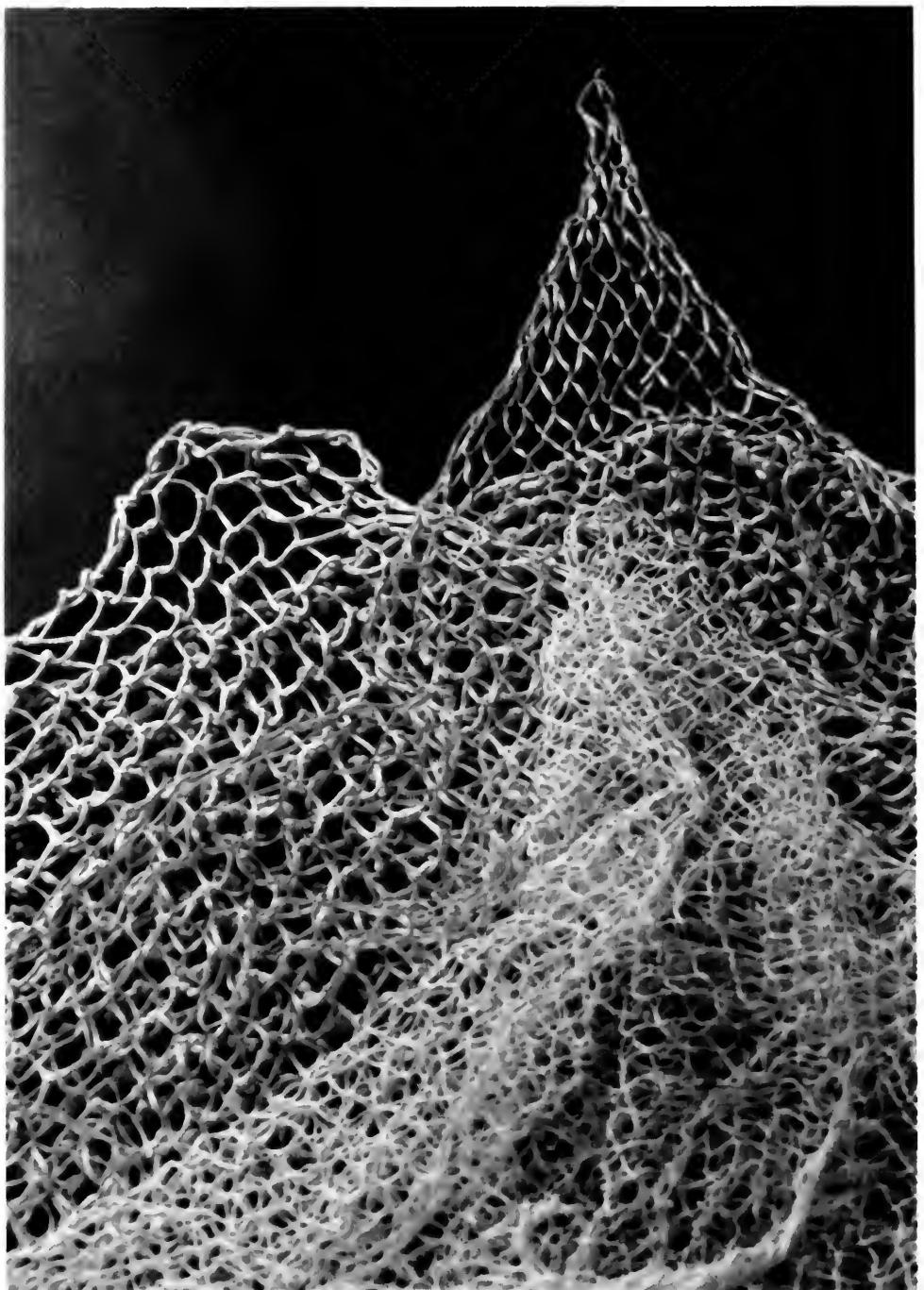
"Charcoal Drawing"

Lillian Elliott and Pat Hickman, 1981

9½'Hx10'Dx4"W

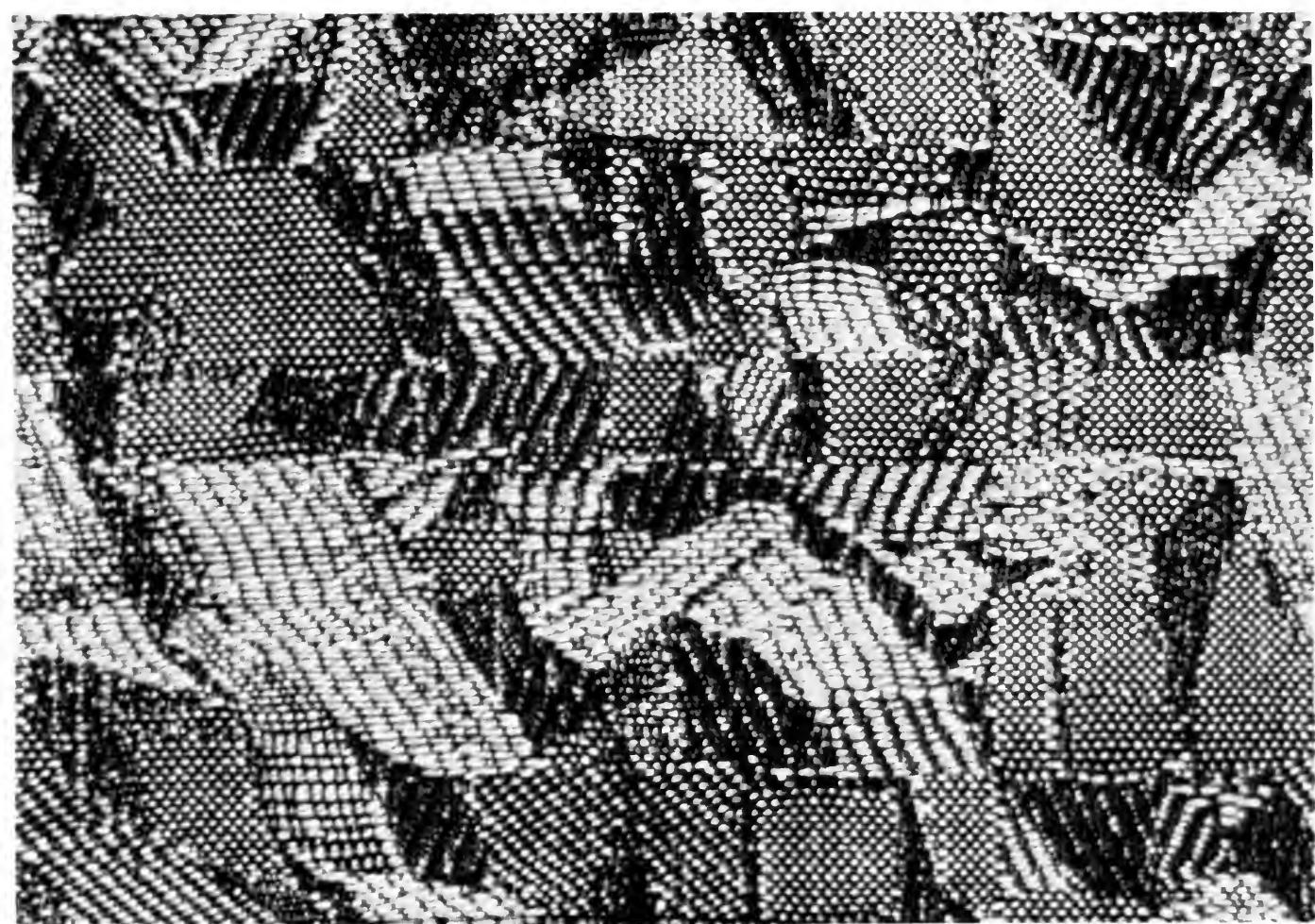
mixed materials

Photograph by Pat Hickman



"Surf" (four separate layers of netting)
Lillian Elliott, 1973
3'Hx3'W
cotton and synthetics

Photograph by Scott McCue



Jacquard sample (detail)
Done at Rhode Island School of Design
Lillian Elliott, 1981
3 yard length
linen, cotton

Photograph by Scott McCue

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